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HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD.

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LONDON: HURST & BLACKETT, LIMITED.

HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD

BY

REGINALD LUCAS

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days
of the life of thy vanity for that is thy portion in
this life.—*Ecclesiastes ix, 9.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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HOIST WITH HER OWN PETARD.

CHAPTER I.

SIR JOHN BALSTOUN 'RECEIVES'
ON A LARGE SCALE.

THE whole house was in a state of commotion; it had been so for a considerable time. From garret to basement, from the topmost regions where the housemaid slept, down to the very cellars which the butler had been visiting so constantly of late, there prevailed general flutter and unrest. It was some weeks now since the

first symptoms of approaching disturbance had become noticeable within the walls of Balstoun Castle. There had then set in a diligence in the decking out of bedrooms, cleaning of plate that usually reposed in secret strong-rooms, polishing up of mirrors, minute inspection by Mrs. Housekeeper of all effects both great and small, that betokened an outbreak of hospitality on a large scale. Not only within doors either : backwards and forwards from house to lodge-gates, and from lodge-gates back to house again, had been running a perpetual stream of carpenters, painters, workers of all sorts ; waggons, carts, and caravans from here, there, and everywhere.

Balstoun Castle had never need fear the charge of inhospitality ; for many years past guests had come and gone as regularly as the seasons, and in fitting harmony with them. Rather solemn and important

people in the spring, when there was nothing particular to do; politicians, archæologists, distinguished foreigners, and distinguished persons of all sorts, to whom Sir John Balstoun loved to extend a welcome that was a little condescending. He was apt to become uncommonly dignified when his house was full of such folks; he liked to feel that he was letting politicians know the sense of the country—of the people who really mattered, that is; he enjoyed the reflected wisdom of learned archæologists when he showed them his possessions, because he had acquired a habit of regarding such reflection as setting in the direction immediately opposite to that which the text here would naturally (and truthfully) suggest. With enquiring German or courtly Frenchman he was at once on terms of magnificent blandness; the honour of the British aris-

toocracy was at stake. And he had once been known to move his entire establishment from London, in order that the bishop, in visiting the Balstoun district, might be entertained with becoming ceremony.

These entertainments took place, we say, in the spring months, as a rule; after winter had blown itself out, and the coy season had come with many blushes and sweet trepidation; before Sir John went up to London to pay the visit which he felt to be due on his part to the great world. After this came the grouse-shooting, and later the pheasants had to be killed, and the house was generally full during the autumn months. Again at Christmas came a host of relatives to eat their mince-pies and burn the Yule log; for if there was one thing at which Sir John was greater than another, it was at

playing the part of patriarch and head of the family when the holly lined the hall and oaken staircase, and the bells rang in the New Year across wide wastes of snow.

But in all these circumstances there had been no kind of glitter; no deliberate gaieties. People could look back upon good talks, good port, good shooting, according to their tastes; but there had been nothing of the brilliant house-party, with its attendant high-pressure existence—in fact, it had not been a ‘Society’ house. Twenty years ago things had been different; Balstoun Castle, with a young mistress, not long married, had been the scene of gatherings as noteworthy as any to be found out of London. Anxious mothers with unmarried daughters had been glad to stay there; young gentlemen, eager to stand well with the world, had set high value on an invitation from Lady

Cornelia Balstoun. But death had rudely interrupted this course of affairs; Sir John had been left a widower, with an heir and an infant daughter. Then had followed an interval of mourning; after which life had run in this quiet and orderly groove.

And now symptoms of a fresh departure had manifested themselves; hurry and flurry and excitement. The fact was, Sir John Balstoun's son and heir was coming of age: Jack was to become twenty-one; and be glorified accordingly. Moreover, Agatha was by this time of an age to be emancipated, and in the festivities arranged in her brother's honour, she was to have a share.

There was to be a tremendous assemblage of guests. Mrs. Housekeeper confessed she could recollect none to surpass it even in her ladyship's time. It was worth turning the house topsy-turvy and setting

the entire establishment working night and day for such company as this. In truth, she was not averse to social resuscitation on any terms. She was growing old certainly, and disposed to enjoy her ease; but the love of power ruled in her capacious breast, and it was proud work wielding such authority as hers amongst the little host of subordinates.

There were to be the Duke and Duchess of Musselburgh, and the earl, her late ladyship's brother, and My Lord this, and Sir George that, and the Right Honourable Mr. so and so, and Honourable misters and misses beyond memory; all of which information she would retail to such honoured individuals as she chose to admit into her private apartment for a dish of tea or a glass of wine. And she moved to and fro from chamber to chamber, supervising, directing, conferring with Sir John,

issuing instructions to her staff, second in importance to no human being within knowledgeable distance. She had dandled Master John as a baby; had been more or less commander-in-chief of the nursery after his mother's death; she loved him as only old servants are accustomed to love grown-up children, and she fancied that history recorded very few occasions deserving of greater consideration than this of his coming of age.

It was really a momentous day, that on which the guests were actually due. Every household contains one entire universe for a given number of people—nothing extraneous matters. To Sir John and his family this was one of the most memorable days since the creation of the world—the old castle re-awakened; the youth bursting into manhood; the young girl on the threshold of life; could

any combination of circumstances present a more fateful situation? Wars, revolutions, discoveries, triumphs, crashes and calamities; what were they all? not of the value of one pin, or one shred of gossamer to the Balstouns. Everything that was in existence had come there to play its allotted part in relation to their affairs, nothing else was worth considering for five minutes.

It is early summer; the country is fresh and green. The fields are alive with wild flowers, the hedgerows and the woods: the blossoms have scarcely faded; the lilacs scent the air, the thorn trees are white as snow; the gladness of youth is upon the earth. The hills that lie on the Scottish border sweep the horizon before Balstoun Castle; the afternoon sun shines upon the grey towers, and there is no external air of commotion.

But let us wait a little : let us listen for wheels ; wheels of many carriages that come to us along the avenue : then let us watch the newcomers alight before the great entrance, and let us follow them into the hall, where Sir John is waiting to receive them. A long, low hall it is, with shining oak floor, panelled oak walls, and a ceiling supported by vast beams seamed and furrowed with age. There are two wide chimney corners, and in each of them some logs are blazing cheerfully, for the fire is never left unkindled by hospitable tradition. Light comes through high mullioned windows on each side of the doorway ; old spears, and shields, and axes, weapons of battle and chase cover the walls ; and strange garments of bygone warriors, and hunters drape the stout pillars that stand at intervals.

Sir John Balstoun is a man of middle

height, whose figure has not given way under the stress of encroaching years, though his beard is already white. He has devoted many years to perfecting personal graces, and he is not without excuse if he inclines to regard himself as rightful heir to the title, which appertained by self-election to our Prince Regent. He has the unruffled front, the imperturbable ease which the ill-bred may strive after in vain: one would think it was a daily occurrence for him to receive such an invasion; one would never suppose that he had no wife to rely upon; he accepts it all calmly, as if nothing could be otherwise than well ordered where he is concerned.

He is not supported with equal confidence. Jack is inclined to be nervous, Agatha is timid, Mrs. Dasent, who has arrived early, is shy. They have been

playing and singing songs in high spirits for some time, but at the approach of visitors the piano is closed.

‘Now for it,’ says Jack. ‘Make the tea, Agatha. Mrs. Dasent, don’t leave me, I feel frightened.’

‘I mustn’t be seen,’ says Mrs. Dasent, laughing, ‘I must efface myself.’

‘You shan’t do anything of the kind ; if you get out of the way, I will too.’

In come the guests, great and small ; a wonderful deal of handshaking goes round ; tea is passed about, and disjointed talking is kept alive for half-an-hour, until, to everybody’s relief, the ladies are taken to their rooms, and a little peace is restored.

Sir John stands in front of the hall fire-place listening to the men talking, sublimely free from fussiness. Presently he marches them off to dress, and emerges from his own room later, the best turned

out man of the lot, despite his grey hairs.

Very handsome, too, he looks at the end of his dinner-table in the long oak chamber that flanks the castle towards the north. From the windows of this room you get the finest view to be seen hereabouts, but it being now dinner time, the view is shut out, and we must look at the diners instead. There sits Sir John underneath his own portrait, painted when he first entered the Guards ; a slim youth, with shaven lip and thick black whiskers, a huge bearskin on a chair at his side, and, in the background, Windsor Castle in a thunderstorm.

There is a great array of departed Balstouns upon the walls, and in their presence Sir John is apt to be stately to the verge of pomp. Once indeed he went so far as to publicly reprimand his son for unbecoming levity in this august company.

The incident arose really from the presence of the third surviving Balstoun, 'Captain Arthur Balstoun, brother of the present baronet, late Scots Fusilier Guards,' as he is described in the local books of reference. Arthur, it must be known, was always something of a target for other men's humour, and his nephew had not, we regret to say, withstood this general proclivity, regardless of the reverence due to his uncle's age and station.

One evening it happened that the baronet was edifying a certain cabinet minister (who was a bit of an antiquarian in his way) with a little local lore and history. Sir John was a man of parts and learning, not untouched with originality. He often took a bold line and stuck to it. Thus he was apt to expound a favourite theory of his own, as to the origin of the family name.

‘Balstoun,’ he would say, ‘I have very little doubt, is only a corruption of boulder stone. You observe our motto, ‘*fortis ac immobilis*,’ bold and immovable; the family fought many a battle, and withstood many an assault in old days, and held its own through them all. You see the idea of the rock, that never gives way.’

His guest bowed gravely, and said he thought the explanation very plausible and ingenious; but Jack ventured upon a daring interruption. Uncle Arthur was playing his customary *rôle*, the common ludibrium, as the decanters came round. Jack was not behind the rest, he drank his wine and chaffed his uncle. Seized suddenly with a brilliant notion, he interrupted his father.

‘Father, do you know what Uncle Spriggins says?’

Sir John did not care for this flippant

manner of alluding to any relative of his ; but he made no objection at present. Jack pointed to a portrait of Sir John Balstoun, anno 1613, a courtier of King James, who was grand enough in his lace and ruffles, but was chiefly remarkable for a broad shiny head, as hairless as an egg. How he had come to be painted without his wig nobody knew ; but there he was, and Jack, his lineal descendant, had found humour in the thing.

‘ Why, Sprig says that we got the name because that old fellow was as bald as a stone.’

Sir John turned back to his guest, after saying quite clearly, ‘ I think that remark was scarcely worth repeating.’

There was no mistaking the tone ; young Jack blushed and his heart sank. He had spoken in a moment of thoughtlessness ; he was young enough to err in the man-

ner without revealing deep-rooted depravity : he felt sorry and ashamed.

As for Uncle Arthur, his blue eyes moved restlessly and he chattered out his protest.

‘Jack, how can you! I assure you, John, it’s his invention.’

He got into a great state of indignation ; just like an angry sheep, as one of the company remarked. Some of them thought it all extremely comic, but Jack found no more merriment in the proceedings : he had vexed his father, and derogated from his own high standard of excellence.

He is older now : see him leaning a little towards the lady next him, a splendid young Briton, with shapely head and clear complexion, the fire and eagerness of youth upon his face. Uncle Spriggins is there too ; his light blue eyes rather restless, his mobile lips a little infirm ; but he has fair

moustache and whiskers, with such an elegant curl in them, that he generally passes for a good-looking man. And Agatha is there too, a sweet blue-eyed maiden, as pretty as any of the female ancestors upon the walls ; prettier far, I think, for her manner, even if a little shy, is nevertheless so completely frank and happy, that it surpasses the artistic charms of all the frilled and padded grandmothers put together.

Here they sit then, the Balstoun family in their castle, keeping high festival ; a very satisfactory situation in which to take our first view of them. We cannot do better than leave them there for the present.

CHAPTER II.

JACK BALSTOUN 'RECEIVES' IN PRIVATE.

JACK BALSTOUN was too much excited to sleep long, and next morning he was down betimes. There was no sign of any of the visitors, from the Duchess of Musselburgh, down to Freddy White of the F.O.: Londoners of many seasons never get excited, and seldom rise early—except perhaps in Ascot week, if they are going to drive from Windsor. None of the distinguished visitors had appeared; even Agatha was nowhere to be seen.

Jack sat upon the terrace in rapt ap-

preciation of his new dignity. He seemed to have been translated, like Bottom; he scarcely knew himself: it was hard to recognise in the young man, welcomed on equal footing by these great personages, the lad who had so recently measured civilisation by the limited experiences of Eton and Balstoun Castle. He had hitherto looked at life over the domestic paling. He was a man at last: a man amongst men—and women.

Sir John Balstoun was not a man to put irksome or unnecessary restrictions upon his son and heir. Throughout life he had been guided by the rules of justice: it was the mainspring of all his actions: and he had considered it right to give his son the means of filling his station in life handsomely. To tell the truth, Jack had been taken aback upon learning his father's magnificent intentions: generosity had

never seemed to him the leading trait in a character which he had been accustomed to revere with a certain amount of awe.

He had begun a profusion of thanks, but Sir John pulled him up.

‘It is nothing remarkable: I wish you to live properly; you are a man now, and must take your own part: wherever you are and whatever you do, bear this in mind; you are the heir of Balstoun.’

It was very charming to contemplate this liberty, but it was not the only result of reaching his majority. He was confronted with a series of functions—presentations, dinners, and other things, all of which entailed speech-making. He was considering the demands of this nature which were hanging over him, when somebody appeared in the nearest doorway. Jack rose quickly, and moved forward to meet a woman of rather slight build

who had stepped out on to the pathway.

The new-comer was beautiful; her eyes were soft and brown, and gave her face rather a mournful air; she was simply dressed, and looked very sweet and pleasant. She was not one of the London folks, only Mrs. Dasent, the widow who rented one of Sir John's cottages. Her story is briefly told. Constance Grey had been the daughter of Canon Grey, an aristocratic old divine, who had acquired some little eminence in the West of England, and had gone to end his days in cathedral cloisters. He was a widower, with no other child; he had lost touch with his family, and lived altogether out of the world. To the cathedral town came one day Herbert Dasent; he met Miss Grey, lingered on, wooed and won her, satisfying the Canon of his excellent character and ample means.

A most charming creature he seemed to be, fascinating indeed, said the ladies of local society ; Miss Grey was much to be envied. In due season they were married ; a very pretty wedding it was, and largely attended ; but it ended in dire mishap. Just as the bridegroom was following his bride into her father's house, a cab drove up in hot haste : somebody wanted to see Mr. Dasent. He stayed a moment, then followed indoors without any signs of concern. But ten minutes later he was gone. The house was searched, hue and cry raised. No one had seen him leave ; no one could give any information, though everyone had a good deal to say. Silently the guests dispersed, and loudly they chattered when they got outside. Really they were extremely sorry for Constance : she was too good a creature to have enemies ; only curiosity was burning hot.

However, no news came of the lost husband until a year or so later, when letters arrived from Australia conveying tidings of his death, numerous messages, and very little explanation of his irregular conduct. It was generally agreed that he was a ticket-of-leave man, or an escaped convict, or a forger, or something he ought not to have been, and that his sin had found him out at a very inconvenient moment. Anyway, he was gone now, and a good job, too. Canon Grey had grown infirm: the following winter carried him off, and Constance Dasent was left alone in the world. She was anxious to get away from past associations of so painful a nature, and, going North, she came upon the little dwelling suited both to her taste and income, which she now inhabited.

Sir John had, upon her arrival, paid her a visit in due form; it was a compliment

he considered due to every one of his tenants ; but, behold, contrary to wont, his attentions did not stop here : it soon became local gossip that Mrs. Dasent was in high favour at the Castle. Sir John had evidently been pleased to look with favour upon Mrs. Dasent. So much so, indeed, that he had actually determined to include her in his house-party for the coming of age.

This is how she came to be here, *ami de la maison*, in the crowd of unfamiliar visitors.

Jack rose quickly, and went to meet her. This was a fortunate encounter. In the turmoil and crowd of the ensuing days he could hardly hope to see much of Mrs. Dasent, and he knew very well that on the frequency of their meetings would his own happiness depend.

He had been, as already remarked, home-

bred; had been accustomed to spend all his holidays at home. This arose from no defect in his social qualifications; he was well enough liked for that matter, and held to be the best of company at all times; but he had a profound affection for Balstoun, and never left it except under compulsion. He had never been short of man's companionship, his own friends and his father's came continually; but, for his age, he was singularly devoid of women friends. Now a youth of one-and-twenty, thoughtful and serious by nature, has need of female counsel. It is as necessary to him as meat and drink and raiment: indeed the absence of it produces a strange uneasiness of mind which is grievous to be borne. Jack had no mother: he had a sister certainly, than whom none sweeter or kinder could be found, but a sister will not do in all emergencies. Thus it came

about that he was more and more drawn towards the little house where Mrs. Dasent dwelt.

Mrs. Dasent was so young that he was but little her junior. Her life had been spent in seclusion greater even than his own, until the days of her tribulation had begun ; and these had been so sudden and so soon ended, that only a small part of her gentleness had worn off. She was not without traces of past suffering ; but they bore resemblance rather to quiet peacefulness and desire for sympathy and affection than to any hardness or bitterness of resentment. It was not very remarkable, then, that an intimacy should have speedily ripened between them. There existed all the requisite elements, and no hindrances. Indeed, Sir John had displayed so much kindness towards the lady that, if one had considered, it would have seemed

that he was aiding and abetting his son. And it had come to this, that Jack was entirely in love with the young widow. She was practically the only woman he had ever known; consequently he might truthfully aver that she was the only one he had ever loved. He had never told her this: he had been quite happy enough hitherto; had been content to keep his secret. Now he was a man, and it behoved him to speak out bravely.

He blushed a little, despite his twenty-one years, as he took her hand.

‘Good morning, Mr. Jack; many happy returns of the day,’ she said. Then she went on, rather shyly, ‘I want to give you this now. You are going to have such a number of grand presents, that I am afraid my poor little offering could scarcely dare to show itself amongst them. You men

are so difficult : you don't want purses and pocket-books worked for you beyond a certain number, and I really didn't know what to make for you. But I've done this : it's not very good, I am afraid, but you know that I give it with my best wishes, don't you ?'

She took from its paper cover a water-colour drawing of the Castle. It was not really very good, for she was an untaught artist, but she had a natural deftness as well as good taste, and the picture was entirely pleasing. But what Jack liked best was the evident care bestowed upon the framing. It was neatly and prettily done in a piece of fancy-work, and on the top were embroidered the Balstoun arms in coloured silks.

'It is charming, Mrs. Dasent, quite charming,' Jack protested. 'I can only

think of something very rude by way of thanking you; something I remember about

“A graciousness in giving that doth make
The small'st gift greatest.”

Not that yours is the smallest gift: nobody could think of anything that would please me more: but it is the graciousness I like most of all. Dear friend, I know well enough you wish me well: you must believe how much I like to have your good wishes. You must have taken endless trouble over this,’ he added, looking at the picture, with unfeigned delight.

Mrs. Dasent was not a little flattered at the success of her effort. At the same time, she felt a sharp thrill of sadness. Her experience of men had not been very fortunate, she had little reason for believing in the kindness of the world; and

here was the one individual whom she had learnt to trust and cling to, about to go through changes. She felt that this might be the last time they could ever meet so: contact with others, new experiences, and wider range of life must surely chill some of the honest fervour which had throbbed in Jack's young veins. He could never become base, but he must inevitably grow to be more like other people. She had never understood until this moment how unhappy it was going to make her. Their friendship had been so pleasant, and now things must be different: he would go away constantly and make new friends. He would soon grow out of his present surroundings, and her quiet existence would be all the poorer for the loss of his companionship.

So she thought: but she deceived herself. True enough, Jack's presence had

made her life happy again, too true indeed. Such cutting regrets do not attend the interruption of common friendships. Mrs. Dasent had been loyal to the house of Balstoun, and in very gratitude for their kindness to her, she had been incapable of intriguing to marry into it. She had not thought of marrying Jack—not deliberately, at all events—but she had permitted herself to love him all the same.

She was far too generous to be a schemer; it was not in her nature to cast a snare for the young heir. Had anyone charged her with such a design, she might have repudiated it with perfect faith. She may have actually persuaded herself that it was an alliance which she could not accept, even if it were offered in the impetuosity of youth. Nevertheless,

‘How is it under our control,
To love or not to love?’

And how many people are there with sufficient mental discipline to resist the foremost human temptation? Mrs. Dasent could not help herself.

‘So I am of age, you see,’ Jack said, presently. ‘I often said I should never grow up; but somehow I have managed it. I used to think I should always be young.’

‘I thought so once,’ said Mrs. Dasent. ‘I daresay we all do, but it can’t be done. Some people change suddenly in a day, as I did. Some take a whole lifetime over it, like my father; he never really left off being a child. I wish you could be slow about it too, but people seem to get quickly old in the world you will live in. It seems to me they shrivel up.’

‘You don’t think I am capable of that, do you?’ demanded Jack.

‘I don’t know. I suppose men must

take life as they find it; and women too, for that matter.'

'Mrs. Dasent, you mustn't say that. What have I done that you should think me likely to be so easily spoiled.'

'Ah, it's not of you I'm thinking ill: it's of everybody else. Little enough I know of the world,' she went on, smiling; 'but little good either.'

'Then I'll not be of the world,' cried Jack.

'That would never do,' said Mrs. Dasent. 'I am sad to think that things wont always be as they are now, that much I have said; but however little one likes to lose one's friends, yet one doesn't wish them to shirk what lies before them. No, Mr. Jack, don't suppose I'm inventing grievances: I am only saying I wish no harm may ever come to you.'

I don't think she quite knew what she

was saying; out of the fulness of her heart she spoke, and her heart was heavily charged.

‘But you are saying it in a very curious manner. I should have thought you had some confidence in me, and yet you appear to think I shall become either a fool or a brute.’

‘You know I don’t mean that,’ she said, reproachfully.

‘Of course you don’t, but you must not have a suspicion. Shall I make you a promise?’

‘No, you must not bind yourself with any vows. One cannot tell what is going to happen.’

‘I don’t care, I vow all the same that I at least will never care for any other things or people than those I care for now; I will never alter. Do you believe that?’

Mrs. Dasent said nothing, she was thinking how impossible such an undertaking must be. It was a natural thing to say, and worthy of Jack ; he would bear as crucial a trial as anyone, but his brave resolution would fade away presently ; he could not always be to her as he had been. He continued :

‘ Do you know how I will make sure of myself ? There is only one way ; by asking you to marry me. I made up my mind long ago, that as soon as I was old enough to be married, I would ask you to be my wife. You are all that I love in the world ; there is nothing I wish for beyond you and my home. Now do you understand that I do not mean to go adrift in the world. My dear, my dear, you must be my wife ; I could never live without you now.’

Mrs. Dasent was swept away by a sudden reaction.

‘Jack, what am I to say? I ought not to listen to you. I am older than you; my life is already broken. Your friends would consider it a dreadful marriage for you.’

‘If you care for me truly, nothing shall hinder us,’ Jack protested.

‘It is because I do love you that I hesitate. You don’t know all your offer means to me; but for your sake I ought to resist. For your sake I must try and say no.’

‘That is because you are noble and unselfish, but don’t let a Quixotic idea ruin all our happiness.’

He pleaded fervently, and now that the situation was upon her, she was off her guard. She realised all the difficulties

and impediments that must inevitably confront them; she knew very well the world would be indignant, and she felt that they would not lack justification. She foresaw all this, yet she hesitated for a moment only. Then her great love conquered all other feelings, and she surrendered herself to her lover.

The sound of the breakfast gong interrupted their interesting confidences, and not without trepidation they prepared to go indoors. Suddenly Mrs. Dasent laughed.

‘I came out here to give you my small present,’ she said; ‘I little thought what you would give me in return.’

‘You cannot pretend now that you have given me less than the others; you have given me yourself.’

‘Don’t talk as if I had begged you to accept me,’ she answered, smiling. ‘Let us go in.’

‘I wish these people would go,’ said Jack, ‘they are in the way. Let me see you as often as possible; I must see you by-and-by. After breakfast I shall tell my father; and then I must see you at once. Will you be in the little library?’

Mrs. Dasent had an involuntary misgiving at the mention of Sir John, but she assented.

‘I think I have employed my birthday pretty well, so far,’ said Jack, as they went towards the house.

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND SON COME IN CONTACT.

THEY found a number of people collected, and preparing to range themselves at the round tables set out in the great dining-room. At Jack's appearance they broke into a chorus of congratulations. The old Duke of Musselburgh made quite a pretty speech,—‘Hope you'll live many years, and be a credit to your country; 'm sure I do.’ It was embarrassing to be so overwhelmed with kindness; they were all cordial. Agatha was tenderly affectionate,

and even old Spriggins gave his nephew such a firm grip of the hand that the latter repented for a moment of the habitual levity with which he treated him.

Sir John was a proud man ; it was worth something to be able to present such a son on such an occasion. Altogether there was a considerable stir and flutter, in the midst of which Mrs. Dasent's arrival escaped notice. She felt very guilty and self-conscious in such a formidable crowd, and longed to keep at Jack's side ; but caution prevailed, and she meekly went and found a seat in another part of the room.

The company were elaborately dressed ; the gowns of the ladies, the neckties of the men, as carefully chosen and put on as though their day was to be spent in the West-End of London, instead of near the Scottish border. A great feast was spread ; a dozen hot dishes, dozens of

plates of rolls and dishes of jam. The Duchess invaded all and sundry with great freedom ; so did his Grace her husband ; but Lady Elizabeth Portobello (daughter of the above) had some difficulty in surmounting one piece of dry toast. Freddy White of the F. O. finished a whole dish of kidneys, and brought upon Professor Flap, who sat beside him, a serious attack of pain by persuading that learned man to partake freely of muffins. As a rule, the company ate rather under protest—their London palates were not used to such good living before noon—and Clarence Prigg (who went everywhere and sang divinely) found himself so much upset by yesterday's fatiguing journey that he broke his fast upon several cups of tea which his servant purveyed at intervals to his bed-room.

The party breakfasting at Sir John's

table seemed disposed to sit and talk. Freddy White, having no wish to stay indoors, and little scruple about escaping from that which he disliked, rose as soon as he had eaten his fill, and passed out on to the terrace to smoke a cigarette. Captain Arthur Balstoun, who was equally incapable of giving or resisting a lead, followed him.

‘Devilish nice, I call this, Spriggins,’ said Freddy, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs to their full extent. ‘Give me a jolly day, a good chair, lots of cigarettes, and nothing to do, and I’m the most contented chap going.’

Arthur Balstoun was one of those men who must needs take everything in earnest.

‘Oh, do you feel contented when you have nothing to do? I should have thought you liked being busy. Aren’t you kept pretty close at the Foreign Office?’

‘ Sometimes I don’t get to bed till two or three in the morning.’

‘ Really? I suppose that’s when despatches have been coming in?’

‘ Yes ; or else when I’ve been going out.’

The Captain looked puzzled, but only said,

‘ Oh, I see.’

The Professor joined them, and he felt shy of prosecuting enquiries in such august company. The eminent historian chose a seat, and scanned the prospect before him with much satisfaction.

‘ There is a good deal of ceremonial going on indoors,’ he said, ‘ so I thought I’d slip out quietly.’

‘ Good gracious, not speeches already!’ exclaimed Freddy White.

‘ Mercifully not,’ replied the Professor ; ‘ but they are laying their tributes before the heir, and I thought mine could wait.

An edition of my humble contributions to history might not create enthusiasm alongside so much splendour.'

'I tell you what, Professor, we mustn't go up together, or we shall clash; I've given him a book of the name of "Handley Cross," and certain others like it. Perhaps you have never read them?'

'Not carefully,' replied Mr. Flap, 'but I have reason to believe they are of a more entertaining nature than my own volumes.'

'That's according to taste. Don't you smoke?' The Professor did not. 'You are right of course,' said Freddy, putting back his cigarette box into his pocket. 'You don't mind my smoking?'

'On the contrary, I envy you; I believe I lose a great pleasure and a valuable sedative; but I was never able to smoke with comfort.'

‘Do you mean it made you ill?’ asked Arthur Balstoun.

‘Invariably,’ said the Professor.

‘You should begin by small degrees,’ went on the Captain, earnestly. ‘I know many people who were ill at first, but they got over it in time like that.’

‘Some men train their stomachs; some their brains. Professor Flap has had as much success with the latter as your friends with the former, Spriggins. Isn’t that about it?’ asked Freddy.

‘Well, really, I never considered it in that way,’ said the Captain.

Somebody called him, and away he bustled into the house.

‘That man will kill himself in time,’ said Freddy White. ‘He fusses to such an extent that he’s bound to wear himself out before long. It’s a shame to chaff

him though: he's such a good-hearted creature. He has given Jack a horse and a beautiful old cup; not bad presents, are they? Besides, he's a wonderfully affectionate chap. To tell the truth, Professor, I'm inclined to like Spriggins better than his brother; the baronet makes a better show, but I don't know that he's as good a man at heart.'

'Sir John is my very good host,' said Mr. Flap.

'And he's my very good cousin; but that doesn't matter. He says he thinks I'm flippant: I say I think he's rather a tartar, so we're quits. He always reminds me of a circus-master, he's so infernally correct, and he's so fond of cracking his whip. I don't think I really would change places with Jack at this moment; would you?'

‘Such a transformation is so extremely improbable, that I had not considered it,’ answered the Professor, good-humouredly, ‘but I shouldn’t be disposed to pity him very deeply.’

One would incline to agree with the Professor. Jack was at this moment taking possession of a splendid array of gifts; jewellery, plate, books. His own portrait was there too, but it had not yet been formally made over to him; a deputation of tenants was to perform that ceremony at noon. The Captain had come upon a silver tankard by some chance, on which appeared the Balstoun arms; this he had bought, and caused to be finely polished up and mounted. It was extremely handsome, and a noble gift.

‘It’s awfully good of you, Uncle Arthur,’ said Jack. ‘I wish I could bring the Monarch in here too, and show people what

a brick you are. He has given me a horse as well,' he explained to the Duchess; 'the nicest horse you ever saw.'

Her Grace had given a set of pearl studs on behalf of the family; Sir John's gift had been a wonderful dressing-bag; his mother's brother had contributed a library writing-set; there was a presentation clock, a presentation barometer from bodies of neighbours; pins, cigarette-cases, sticks and whips, from his friends; clearly he was an enviable young man. And then that little present he had received in the garden before breakfast, with the little scene that followed: when these are borne in mind, there remains no doubt that he was very lucky indeed.

There is, however, a *per contra* side to all accounts; and, upon the balance-sheet of Jack's score with Fortune, there stood a big entry respecting an interview owing

to Sir John. He was bent upon unfolding his aspirations in the matter of love to his father without delay. So eager was he, indeed, that he found some difficulty in attending to the crowd of flattering friends that beset him. He wished them gone; and yet, when he presently found himself free, a certain feeling that the ordeal would bear postponing made him hesitate. He lingered about the hall, pretending that he could not get away just yet; that he was not a bit afraid really. Perhaps Sir John was not to be found at present. As a matter of fact he was in his own room, and Jack knew it.

Sir John was in his study. He was apparently in very earnest cogitation; for he paced to and fro, sat down, got up again, as if his mind was active, but undecided.

He was preparing to take a great step, and debating whether the right moment

had arrived. For some time he had been contemplating re-marriage; that was the truth of the matter.

‘I am getting on in years now,’ he thought; ‘my son will be less with me as he grows older; my daughter is at the age when a mother is most desirable. I should like to feel that there is somebody to take care of her, and subsequently of me. We want somebody, all of us.’

So far the reasoning was sound; it might almost be made to appear as if he were doing an unselfish act for the good of his house and family: but the personal element might be lurking underneath. This train of thought had been running in his mind some little time, ever since Mrs. Dasent had come to live near the castle, in fact; and, whether it was that her arrival had suggested the idea of getting married, or the idea of getting married

had suggested her, it behoves us not to testify. Only the fact remains that the two had somehow become closely interwoven in the baronet's mind. He contemplated making Mrs. Dasent his wife.

He had not approached her on the subject. It has been said that his attentions to her had been remarked ; his manner had been perfection : but the suggestion of a flirtation was preposterous when one considers the character of the man. Moreover, he considered it due to his son that he should be first apprised ; that was his view of what was just and right. He would speak to Jack when the matter was ripe for settlement, and why not now ?

‘The marriage,’ meditated Sir John, as he looked at himself in the glass, ‘may surprise people a little. Not that I care what they say. If I choose to ask a lady to be my wife, and she does me the hon-

our to accept my offer, she need fear no remark that I am aware of from Society. It will not be necessary for her to look for favours from anybody. At the same time, it would be nice to arrange things while these people are in the house, so that the position might be understood, and they might make friends with her.'

This was the project which weighed upon the Baronet's mind; and whilst his son was postponing on his part an inevitable interview by dawdling in the hall, the father, alone in his room, was trying to persuade himself that an interview of a strangely similar nature was for himself desirable.

He decided in the affirmative, and was on the point of ringing the bell to send Jack a message, when the door opened, and his son stood upon the threshold. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, Sir

John felt shy; absolutely shy, like a blushing school-girl; his intense pride touched his most sensitive nerves, but it kept him at the same time from yielding one inch in his resolve.

‘Come in, Jack; I was going to send after you, I wanted to see you.’

Jack came in, and a preliminary skirmish began: neither man was in a hurry to come to close quarters.

‘I wanted to speak to you,’ began the son; then he broke down.

He could not at the moment find the right words. Fortunately, his eye fell upon a list of the guests for the tenants’ dinner that was lying on the table, and he seized upon it.

‘I wanted to ask you,’ he began; it seemed an easy way of letting himself down, and accounting for his visit. ‘I wanted to ask you whether you would

include old Rawbones. Of course he's no longer a tenant of yours, but his family were for many years ; and so was he until he got broke by misfortunes.'

'All I know is, he let down my farm in a shocking manner,' said Sir John, drily.

'But remember what he had to put up with ; his son died of consumption, and he was often ill. He must have spent a fortune on doctors.'

'He spent very little on me or my land,' said Sir John. 'I'm sorry for the man, but I think I've done what's fair by him.'

'Certainly you have. Of course he's no claim on you at all, but he's a good old fellow, and I thought that perhaps you might make an exception in his favour.'

'I don't think there is any occasion for it,' said Sir John, and there the matter rested.

Jack knew very well that when his father assumed this judicial manner he was not to be further questioned.

Now Sir John advanced a step in the negotiation.

‘I wanted to see you about a matter of considerable importance to both of us,’ he said.

Jack was aware that his coming of age might involve certain estate business, and began to wonder what form this was to take.

‘You see, Jack, I am getting on in years. I didn’t marry very young, and now that you have grown up I find myself becoming an old man.’

‘Not so very old, father; you mustn’t talk like that, yet awhile.’

‘I am getting towards the sear, the yellow leaf all the same, and I feel it is time to think about setting my house in order, in every sense of the word. You

are now twenty-one; Agatha is eighteen, and I must not forget that the days of childhood are passed. Whatever you may do, there is no doubt that Agatha will be getting married some day, and leaving me. Hitherto she has been very fortunate in her bringing up; I am sure Miss Mirabel has been invaluable to us.'

This unfortunate remark seemed to act like a spell or an incantation. He was getting on admirably, and quite enjoying his diplomatic skill in exposition, when a knock at the door broke the thread of his discourse.

'Come in,' he exclaimed, sharply; the door opened, and Jack muttered, 'Talk of the devil,' for Miss Mirabel appeared.

She was a strikingly handsome creature; tall, with a superb figure. Her nose was rather large, but her mouth was perfect: her eyes were capable of other uses be-

yond those of vision one would think ; and her hair, which was dressed quaintly over a broad forehead, was wonderfully soft and wavy.

She evinced a becoming modesty in finding that she had interrupted their conversation, but gave no sign of awkward embarrassment.

‘ I am very sorry to disturb you, Sir John, but I am afraid there are one or two things about which I must trouble you. Please don’t go, Mr. Jack,’ she added, ‘ I have nothing in the shape of a secret to disclose,’ and she smiled in the manner of a person who is grateful, and humble, and anxious to please, and altogether amiable.

Sir John rose and offered the governess-manager a chair with great courtesy : and she forthwith entered upon a number of domestic concerns. She certainly appeared to be a valuable member of the house-

hold. Having finished off Agatha's education, she had continued to devote herself to the duties of duenna, as well as to those of house-manager, and an admirable manager she had proved herself to be.

'I have seen Mercer, and Dawdle, and Trencher,' she said; 'I think everything is arranged as you wish it.'

'I am under great obligations to you, Miss Mirabel,' said the Baronet, taking in his hand some memoranda.

She smiled and looked down modestly.

'Am not I under far greater obligations to you, Sir John? I have no other object than to do as you desire: darling Agatha must not be burdened with household cares already.'

'She will learn: you will teach her,' said Sir John, examining his papers; he did not seem to be thinking of what he

said, and he did not notice how she glanced at him as he spoke.

‘I shall do my best, Sir John,’ she said.

He was looking at a table arrangement for the day’s banquet: Miss Mirabel had been allotting the places.

‘This seems excellent,’ he said; ‘wait a moment, though; I don’t see Mrs. Dasent’s name at our table, you’ve forgotten her.’

He spoke indifferently, but he felt a little secret excitement, and was ashamed of being such a humbug. As it happened, his son was on the verge of blushing from a similar consciousness.

‘I was afraid there would be no room,’ said Miss Mirabel. ‘Darling Agatha must be there, of course, and that fills the table. I thought Mrs. Dasent wouldn’t mind sitting next to Mr. Tracer where I am, here,’ and she pointed to the plan.

Sir John was annoyed.

‘I hardly like that,’ he said. ‘I should like all my guests to be together. Surely there is room for another next to Arthur there, opposite me,’ he added, laying his finger on the page.

Miss Mirabel smiled at him sweetly. ‘If you don’t think it would make a crowd, it might certainly be so.’ And so it was arranged.

There were several things to be settled, and Miss Mirabel’s visit was prolonged. She had been there over a quarter-of-an-hour, and was preparing to go, when the butler came and announced that the deputation of tenants had arrived to present Jack’s portrait.

It was extremely inconvenient: both father and son were angry now at finding their disclosures left unmade; but it could not be helped. There was nothing

for it but to go to the hall, where the visitors were assembled ; and there, with a good deal of hand-shaking and speech-making, the deed was done to the satisfaction of all persons concerned—especially of him who was the tenants' spokesman, and mightily enjoyed his own importance.

CHAPTER IV.

JACK AND HIS FATHER BOTH MAKE SPEECHES.

JACK was aware that, according to their agreement, Mrs. Dasent would be waiting for him in the little library—a small book-room opening out of the great library, which was not unknown to fame in the world of bookmen. As soon as the deputation had retired, he made off in an opposite direction, and, after a considerable *détour*, descended upon the library by a secret passage. He paused at the threshold, fearful lest some visitor of literary habits might be spending his morning amongst books. Happily, the attractions of

the gardens and the sunshine had been sufficient to take them all out-of-doors. Even the Professor had no mind for study on such a day as this, and was devoting the entire strength of his intellect to winning a game of halma against pretty Mrs. Joyce on the terrace.

Jack crossed the room quickly, and let himself into the smaller chamber. Mrs. Dasent looked up from the book she was pretending to read, and, finding that it was no chance intruder, put it unceremoniously aside and started from her chair.

‘I have seen my father, Con,’ Jack began. Mrs. Dasent looked inquiringly at him, and he added, ‘But I hadn’t a chance of telling him.’ Mrs. Dasent’s face fell. ‘It wasn’t my fault, dear. I was waiting to begin till he had finished what he was saying, when Miss Mirabel came in. She had a lot of things to talk about, and, by

the time we were rid of her, the tenants came to give me the picture. It was a horrid nuisance, but never mind ; I'll catch him some time to-day. Besides, what does it matter ? It makes no difference to us, does it ?'

Mrs. Dasent's hand was on his shoulder, but her eyes were turned to the ground.

'I hope not,' she said, presently. 'I am afraid I am always rather distrustful ; that's why I should be happier if it were done. I wish Miss Mirabel hadn't come in. I am rather afraid of her, Jack ; I'm sure she hates me.'

'My dear, what nonsense. She's a sort of presiding deity here, and hasn't a bad word for anybody. You mustn't be prejudiced against Miss Mirabel.'

'Perhaps I am wrong : only I can't help thinking she's more likely to bring me bad luck than good.'

‘But she always talks of you kindly enough; I never heard her say a word against you.’

‘No; she is friendly enough when she comes to see me, but I always feel inclined to devote myself to my patron saint when she crosses my threshold.’

‘You mustn’t talk like that; we’ll have no bad omens. You’ll have to acknowledge you are wrong this evening, when I tell you what father says. He’ll settle your fears fast enough.’

‘Ah, dear Jack, don’t think I’m cross—only the issue is so great. I never thought to be so happy in this world; it seems much too good to be true. I can’t believe it will all run smoothly.’

‘The course of true love seldom does; but I don’t see why ours shouldn’t. You mustn’t look so sad though; come, I’ll have it out with him directly. At least,

not exactly directly,' he added. 'Let's stay here a little; we sha'n't get many chances of being alone with the house so full.'

The temptation was great, and they stayed on regardless of time and all other things and people. Goodness knows it was happiness sufficient to make up for lost time and opportunities in a general way, but as it happened it cost Jack his promised interview. Lunch-time took them by surprise, and afterwards no chance of speaking to his father privately offered itself. And the day passed cheerfully and pleasantly, but *re infectâ*.

At seven o'clock the dinner was given in the great dining-room; one table under the portrait of the bald-headed ancestor, many others ranged down the room. At the former sat Sir John with his son and all his house-party; and at the others sat in full muster the Balstoun tenantry.

Some of the London guests grumbled a good deal at having to dine so early, and considered the whole thing a bore; but they had come there prepared for a certain amount of inconvenience, and behaved with tolerable grace. Lady Elizabeth Portobello and Clarence Prigg, who sat together, were perhaps the least contented. 'What horrible creatures they are,' said the young lady, passing a scornful gaze round the room, 'they are so fat and ugly.'

The elegant Clarence (whose father had sold candles and soap in Bristol,) murmured something about 'blood always telling in the long run, and low breeding being indelible.'

'I wonder why one submits to these ordeals,' continued the young lady.

'They like it,' answered Clarence, with an air of superb condescension towards the diners.

Perhaps they did; anyhow they were getting through their dinner with great apparent relish.

‘He seems a nice boy,’ Lady Elizabeth went on, eyeing Jack, who looked as handsome as a prince, seated in the place of honour, his head erect, his whole air animated and proud.

‘Raw,’ said Prigg, ‘very raw. He’s not much manners yet, but he’ll learn, I daresay.’

That meant he will learn to drop his frank, courageous spirit, and acquire the exquisite self-control of me, Clarence Prigg. A monkey arrayed in stolen finery considers himself a noble creature, and comprehendeth not that others of higher degree regard him as a vulgar upstart and a sham.

The Duke of Musselburgh had a great deal to say about land legislation and agricul-

tural depression ; and her Grace was rather a good hand at preaching domestic economy ; so they both found the company an interesting object for discourse. Freddy White was trying to persuade Professor Flap that the Romans were a slovenly lot, who sprawled about their dining-rooms instead of sitting up at the table properly ; and became so strong in support of old-fashioned English dishes, as to press the historian to dine with him one evening off tripe at a restaurant (with which he was acquainted) near Charing Cross.

The toast of the evening was proposed by a stout north-countryman, who had been a tenant of Sir John's many a long year ; descendant of a line of tenants. He made a kind manly speech ; loyal as became one who belonged in such wise to the family.

Then Jack rose to make his acknowledgment ; and as he stood there, could any

more enviable *rôle* be imagined? Young, handsome, full of promise, heir to everything around him, he stands before them the idol of the moment. And why? Warriors, workers, discoverers, receive such acclamations sometimes when they have accomplished a great thing for their country's good. What had Jack Balstoun done? Nothing, so far as we are aware, except that he had been born his father's heir. Yet this homage was not forced, was not fulsome. At that moment he was as much a true object of adulation as the worthiest warrior or discoverer of them all. We may cant and lecture to our heart's content about inherent equality and the worthlessness of rank, but we are wrong. People are born great, after all; and if a man happens to be a king or a duke, or a baronet of Balstoun Castle, he is *per se* a very much greater person than

I am, perhaps, who come into this world a respectable member of the middle-class without any particular ability or wealth, or any spirit of enterprise within me wherewith to make myself known amongst men.

I say I envy Jack Balstoun with all my heart. If for nothing else, I envy him the glances of the beautiful women sitting round him. Agatha, his sister, is betwixt tears and laughter, so full of love and pleasure is she. The Duchess beams upon him; even Lady Elizabeth gets excited, and has neither eyes nor ears now for Clarence Prigg. And from across the table he meets the steady gaze of Constance Dasent; and he forgets all else than that she is listening, and his heart bounds within him, and he speaks out bravely. He is not nervous now, he feels himself the master.

Then somebody proposes the health of the family, and Uncle Arthur makes a stupid blunder by drinking his own health in a mixture of port and claret, for he is excited and acts heedlessly. Jack cries out to him, 'Sit down, Spriggins, they're talking about you,' and the gallant Captain blushes, and subsides into his seat, till Freddy White persuades him that he must stand up whilst Sir John returns thanks; and then Spriggins blushes redder than ever, and looks very sheepish; which angers Sir John, who hates people making themselves (or him) ridiculous, but greatly entertains everybody else.

The banquet ended, a move was made to the terrace which flanked the main entrance on either side, where (at the instigation of Miss Mirabel) Mr. Tracer had arranged a splendid scene. Forty men stood in a semi-circle with blazing torches

bright enough to illuminate the gravel space between the house and the great avenue of beeches. And on to this space a moment later broke a gallant cavalcade ; several score of stalwart yeoman mounted on stout horses.

In the centre of the terrace stood Jack Balstoun, bare-headed ; at his right hand, his father ; and ranged on either side, the numerous guests. The tenantry who filled up the whole open space wheeled round their horses to face this company. There was silence, then Jack's voice rang out—

‘Gentlemen, to each one of you, my thanks : may we for many years to come be able to meet and part as we do to-day. I wish you good-night, and most heartily God-speed.’

Every man in the troop raised his whip on high, and lifting his hat, gave a mighty

cheer that went rolling and echoing far away amongst the dark hills; then they turned and galloped off down the avenue, still cheering lustily; and their shouts long continued to reach the castle walls as the riders separated, and went in knots of two and three, or alone to their neighbouring homes.

They had all gone now; the torches were extinguished: the excitement began to die out and spirits to flag as the sparkle goes out of champagne. Nobody seemed to know exactly what to do next; they were standing awkwardly about, and not comfortably disposed for quiet conversation. Arthur Balstoun, who was in a state of fidgets quite sufficient to upset the general peace, made desperate efforts to provide amusements.

‘Are you fond of games, Lady Elizabeth?’ he said. ‘I saw such a good game

played at Mumtulloch when I was there ; I never laughed so much in my life. Shall we play it now ?’

Asked to explain nature and form of said game, finds difficulty in recollecting how it begins, but declares it to be vastly entertaining. Further pressed as to rules and procedure, admits entire lapse of memory, but still maintains it to be of a mirth-provoking character. Captain Balstoun stands down. The next suggestion comes from Freddy White, who wants them all to tie on to one another with lengths of string, and pretend to ascend the Jungfrau.

‘It will be quite exciting in the dark ; I’ll be your guide,’ says he.

This is intelligible, at all events, but does not seem to meet the case. Clarence Prigg is the man ; he says nothing, but, passing through the open window, goes to

the piano, and the difficulty is solved. Some who like good music sit down to listen ; others who prefer a quiet talk display a centrifugal tendency two and two. Music sets them all at ease ; they can rest or entertain themselves according to their several ideas of pleasure.

Clarence Prigg was the sort of person whom no one seemed to know intimately, though everyone knew him very well. Very few people took the trouble to abuse him ; fewer still praised him. One might affect to consider him a poor creature, but his musical talent was undeniable, and as Freddy White expressed it, ‘if only that chap would stick to the music-stool, he’d be a gem.’ The Duchess was not disposed to make a favourite of him, but when he had sung his first song, even she was enthusiastic.

‘What a dear little song,’ she exclaimed.

‘What’s it called? who is it by? Elizabeth, you must get that; I call it charming.’

‘It’s sweet,’ said Lady Elizabeth; ‘I never heard it before.’

Clarence Prigg was gratified.

‘It’s one of mine, Duchess,’ he said. ‘I’m glad you think it’s pretty. I’ll sing it again, shall I?’ And he sang:

‘Where first the primrose tufts are pale,
 ‘Neath April’s sun, I found her;
 Light sounds were floating on the gale,
 Fresh life was springing round her.

‘So fair a maid must be divine,
 ‘Twas meet I should adore her;
 As pilgrim kneels beneath his shrine,
 I bowed the knee before her.

‘Then passed unseen; to learn her name
 No longer I delayed there:
 But straight into my heart she came,
 And ever since has stayed there.’

‘I think I must call it, “To the Unknown Goddess,”’ he said: ‘a scriptural title.’

Sir John Balstoun was by no means a

worshipper of Clarence Prigg, but he found himself humming with some emphasis the last few bars :

‘ But straight into my heart she came,
And ever since has stayed there.’

Mrs. Dasent was sitting close to where he stood. Jack was at her side, happy in such silent companionship, seeing that there was no hope of any other. She, too, felt she must have him there. She wanted to be near him continually ; besides, in this gathering she felt especial need of his protection. In the midst of it she was lonely. There seemed to exist a free-masonry amongst these London people, in which she had no part. It was an intangible something in their manner towards one another, an ease and intimacy ; always something to say, scarcely ever anything worth saying. Their talk was of food and daily habits, of likes and dislikes, and

things which any mortal ought to be capable of discussing; and yet when it came to running her ideas alongside those of Lady Elizabeth Portobello, there seemed to be a hitch somewhere. They were not yet on the same plane, and no amount of effort will avail to make two uncongenial minds good company for one another. It was not so with them all. With the Duchess, for instance, she felt intimate at once; it was easy enough and pleasant enough to talk with her, even in the midst of interminable names. That seemed to her the staple of all their talk—names, names, names. They were all strange to her, and she felt shy in consequence. What, again she wondered, could be the affinity of ideas between Professor Flap and pretty Mrs. Joyce, with whom he was always playing halma. Surely they could not have much in common, a learned pro-

fessor and a popular young married woman of society; and yet they were never tired of one another's company. She had overheard them a few minutes ago. Mrs. Joyce had attacked the Professor on his antipathy to music.

‘Why do you not like it?’ she demanded, indignantly. ‘What can you find to say ill of it.’

‘Nothing,’ replied Mr. Flap, ‘because I can make nothing of it.’

‘Do you mean to say you can see no difference between one tune and another?’

The Professor reflected a little.

‘I think some tunes are louder than others,’ he admitted.

Then Clarence Prigg began again.

‘This,’ he said, ‘is rather quaint: I don’t know whether you will care for it. I got the idea from a Swiss peasant whom I heard singing; it is a curious air, and I

fitted some words to it just as they occurred to me. You are familiar with the poet's habit of stringing words together without exact method, suggested by the sights and sounds of the moment; a sunset sky, a church tower in the distance, some light clouds, and the cold breeze coming up: Browning did it.' With which modest prologue he sang to a peculiar air that must have taxed his skill as a pianist—

‘Black as a raven’s wing,
Tapering high t’ards heaven,
Though doomed at his birth,
No man upon earth
But finds for his sin some leaven.

‘Deadly as serpent’s sting,
Light as a wafted feather,
No sin is so foul
That body and soul
Lose pardon and hope together.

‘Storm-cloud and rain in Spring,
Sun when the old year’s ending,
Though hearts have got old
And love has grown cold
No sorrow is past all mending.’

There was a great deal of applause at the finish of this.

‘Now, Professor,’ said Mrs. Joyce, ‘you surely see some difference between that song and the one before.’

‘Yes, it seemed to me a little longer.’

Mrs. Dasent felt envious of this light manner of talk, of which she was consciously incapable. Even when Arthur Balstoun began to urge Mr. Flap to go through a long course of concerts, with a view to acquiring a better notion of music, his interference seemed more amusing than anything else. It escaped the stiffness and formality of made-up conversation.

Mrs. Dasent turned this over in her mind. She was not so much desirous of being initiated into these mysteries as of being quit of them. If only they were alone—she and Jack, and his own people

—how much nicer it would be. Then she found herself being spoken to by Sir John; he said a word or two, and presently marched her off to a seat in the window, where, he explained, they might converse more comfortably.

Miss Mirabel, at this juncture, rose and moved gracefully away from the circle round the piano. Captain Balstoun espied her, and followed with alacrity. Doubtless he was a good-hearted fellow, as Freddy White had said, and was unwilling that the governess should feel neglected. Outside the room he came up with her: she turned on him at once, and said, with considerable composure,

‘Captain Balstoun, will you be very good? I have lost some keys between here and the boat-house; I daren’t go to bed till they are found. If you could help me I should be so grateful; I daresay you

will see them in the moonlight. I was going to look for them myself. If you really don't mind going, I can stay here.'

Arthur professed himself delighted, and Miss Mirabel declared her gratitude in a manner that must have been agreeable to any chivalrous gentleman. Away went the Captain to prowling about with his eyes intent upon the ground. Oddly enough, away went Miss Mirabel, not back into the room where Clarence Prigg was playing, but on to the terrace. Here she passed, silent as a shadow, to a seat beside the window occupied by Sir John and Mrs. Dasent, and sat herself down—to think, no doubt. That must have been the reason; else she could not have been so oblivious of the sound of voices that reached her ear.

'I am very proud of him,' Sir John was saying.

'Indeed you may be,' answered Mrs.

Dasent. 'Nobody would want excuses for that; all his friends must be proud of him.'

'Including you? I hope you are interested in him too?'

'Oh, yes, Sir John.'

'My dear lady, you must let us consider you one of our most intimate friends: is it not so?'

'You are much too kind to me.'

'It is a kindness that is selfish: we should be glad to think you were going to remain always with us, and of us.'

Could Mrs. Dasent believe her ears: surely Jack must have said more than he himself remembered to his father. This sounded nothing less than direct encouragement to her alliance with his son. She was speechless and amazed. Sir John went on, in a low, earnest voice—

'Agatha is so fond of you, and she is

now at an age when a strong sympathy would be everything to her; you could be an invaluable friend to Agatha.'

'I wish I might; it would make me so happy.'

'And me. It would be a supremely happy day for me, and for Balstoun, upon which you consented to become its future mistress. It is a matter upon which my heart has been fixed of late; the hope has been very dear to me. May I believe that I am not to be disappointed?'

'Sir John, you make me so happy that I cannot thank you as I should like to thank you. Indeed I will try to give you no cause to repent.'

She was a good deal agitated, and Sir John felt that it was risking a scene to say more. He murmured something else gently, and then they moved towards a group near them. They had come to a

most happy understanding, thought Sir John; to-morrow he would have it all settled. At all events, they had arrived at an extremely happy misunderstanding, for both he and Mrs. Dasent were, according to their relative tempers and views, in a seventh heaven of delight.

CHAPTER V.

ABOUT MISS MIRABEL.

ARTHUR BALSTOUN returned from a fruitless search. He had paced up and down the garden-path until he had nearly worn holes in the heels of his thin socks. He had looked and looked until the blue eyes were ready to fall out of his head; still there was no sign of the missing keys. Reluctantly he gave up the search as the hour grew late, and went to report his ill-success to Miss Mirabel.

‘I am very sorry,’ he said; ‘I looked everywhere, but I can’t find them.’

Miss Mirabel was back in the music-room now, talking unconcernedly to somebody. She looked up at Arthur.

‘Find them? whom?’ she said, absently. ‘Oh, I beg your pardon—I was wrong all the time; I found the keys in the hall. How good of you to look; and you had the trouble for nothing.’

‘Never mind me,’ answered Arthur, cheerfully. ‘It’s all right, you know, as long as they are found.’

She gave him her hand quite affectionately when she took her candlestick and went upstairs; and Arthur considered himself amply rewarded for his wild-goose chase.

One of the greatest of all novelists affects a certain modesty at the idea of intruding into a lady’s bed-room. Not daring to assume the manner of that great man, I make no scruple of accompanying

Miss Mirabel into her chamber, for the express purpose of learning her thoughts. She gives a strange exclamation as she closes the door, half a groan, half an angry cry ; then she goes with quick step to the window, and, throwing it open, leans there, chin upon hand.

Miss Mirabel, who has appeared hitherto but fitfully, must now have a chapter to herself. Let it be understood then that she is a woman who has been playing a bold game with her life, and has this evening discovered that she is held fast in check. Her thoughts go back to a date not far remote when she first came into the circle of the Balstoun influence, and the story runs somehow as follows :

In the city of Sydney, New South Wales, a spirit of enterprise (much to be commended) has prompted the construction of a great and imposing building in the

nature of a town-hall. Herein occur colonial gatherings of much significance, when the fathers of the Australian Commonwealth, or Republic, or Kingdom (according as Fate intends) meet, as has been their wont hitherto, to do honour to their own institutions, and to Queen Victoria's servant, their Governor. When not given up to political and public functions, it is used as a concert-hall; and thus it happened that upon a certain day a notice was posted outside the building to announce that the celebrated Miss Mirabel would that night sing in a ballad concert.

It was near the close of the year, and the day was hot and sultry. Sydney wore a forlorn appearance. The ragged horses in the rattling old cabs looked more dismal and dejected than usual. The drivers, with well-protected heads, sprawled on their boxes and looked as if they really could

not be bothered to take up fares. The streams of wires overhead glittered in the blaze, and the pavement was nearly red-hot. Blinds were down in the windows, and there was not much sign of life. Here and there a dog moved leisurely about as if he was rather enjoying himself; and from one or two shops came the notes of a piano, in evidence that the young citizenesses of Sydney are not without elegant accomplishments.

Two men came presently upon the scene. They were unlike the other foot-passengers in this respect, that they seemed to have no business on hand. It would be foolish to suppose that they were on pleasure bent; but they clearly were not busy, like the heated persons who occasionally passed them.

One of them, the younger, was a man of thirty or thereabouts, gentlemanlike and

apparently a resident, for he frequently exchanged a 'good day' with some one or another. The other was a fair man with light blue eyes and restless hands, who was giving himself a great deal of trouble about making the most of his opportunities of seeing Sydney.

'Whew! it's hot in these streets, isn't it, Spriggins?' exclaimed the former, pushing back his hat. 'What ever induces people to come to Australia when they can stay in England, I don't know.'

'But surely you could have stayed there if you had liked.'

'I suppose I could.'

'But you said just now——'

'For goodness sake don't argue in this heat. It will be cooler in the Domain: let's go and sit there and look at the ships.'

It was the Governor's aide-de-camp who

spoke. He had come into Sydney from the country where his Excellency was spending the hot season, and had met Captain Balstoun, his old brother officer in the club. The gallant captain had recently retired from the service of Her Majesty, and was indulging in a little foreign travel. Being on terms of friendship with the Governor of New South Wales, he was about to become his Excellency's guest.

The aide-de-camp stood on the edge of the pavement and looked up and down the street.

‘This is a blooming fine town,’ he said. ‘It’s a regular hobbledehoy: it must have been fun a century ago when people were living on kangaroos which they caught in the streets, and it may be a good place a century hence when things have toned down a little: at present it’s betwixt and between.’

‘I suppose you’ll hardly stay here to see that,’ said Captain Balstoun. He always tried to keep up his end of a conversation.

The aide-de-camp regarded him a moment.

‘No, Spriggins, I expect not,’ he said; and crossed the road.

By so doing he was brought face to face with the advertisement of the concert in which the celebrated Miss Mirabel was announced to sing.

‘Oh, look here, Spriggins,’ he said, ‘let’s go and hear this lady to-night. They say she is tip-top, and a pretty woman to boot.’ Captain Balstoun consented, and, entering the building, the aide-de-camp bought two tickets.

They dined at the Union Club that night, and they dined well. Arthur Balstoun had spent the last three weeks on board

ship, and it was no small luxury to find himself sitting in a cool corner of the club dining-room, without Chinamen to wait on him, with a friend for a companion, and a change of diet in the matter of food. He talked prodigiously and drank copious draughts of cool champagne ; for the Captain, if fidgetty, was no shirker of reasonable pleasures. The aide-de-camp was glad enough to see him. He had always been of opinion that Spriggins was an ass ; but a good ass at that ; and he was full of news about things that were of interest—things he wanted to hear about. They were good company then to one another, and, oblivious of time and concert, they cheered their souls to the full with good wine, and afterwards betook themselves to cigars. There were comfortable chairs in the garden, and it was a blessed sensation to compose their well-fed persons

amongst the cushions, and smoke sweet tobacco. The smell of the hot town was tempered by cool sea-breezes, and all things were convenient for repose. But the aide-de-camp was energetic, and he was fond of music.

‘Come,’ he said, presently, ‘we can finish our cigars on the way, let us go and hear Miss Mirabel sing.’

Then occurred the only known instance of Arthur Balstoun opposing another man’s suggestion.

‘It’s very jolly here, don’t you think we had better stay?’

‘Spriggins, haven’t you a soul for music?’

‘Oh, yes, as a rule; but this is delightful.’

‘Nor an eye for beauty. Don’t you want to see the lovely Mirabel.’

The Captain was in revolt. ‘I don’t believe she’s a bit good-looking,’ he declared.

‘How the deuce do you know?’

‘They never are, these people who get touted.’

‘She’s not touted. You’ll swear you know she’s ugly next, I suppose.’

‘I shouldn’t be surprised,’ said Spriggins, vaguely.

The aide-de-camp being more or less in the position of host, had a little reluctance in insisting, but he did insist. Arthur Balstoun had to go, and by this narrow chance he took the step which led to such a long series of complications.

The hall was well filled, and the concert in mid-way when they arrived. Arriving so late, they were the objects of considerable attention, and Captain Balstoun felt shy. A stout man was singing ‘Tom Bowling’ lustily, like unto the howling of an angry tempest.

‘This will make an effective set-off for

Miss Mirabel,' said the aide-de-camp, but Arthur Balston remained indifferent, he was casting furtive glances round the audience, studying Sydney types.

'Tom Bowling' reached his appointed end, and was sung to his watery death; the stage was left empty for a moment, and then from the side staircase appeared Miss Mirabel. She came forward to the piano, acknowledging with a graceful bow the applause which welcomed her. Good gracious! Arthur Balstoun started as if he had been pinched. His indifference was gone, his interest in the types of Sydney vanished. He was ravished by this vision of delight. He had never beheld a creature so beautiful; his blue eyes almost left his head, and his fingers twitched and wrestled with the arms of his seat. He listened open-mouthed to the singing of the siren.

‘Well, what do you think of her?’ asked the aide-de-camp. ‘Not a bad singer.’

‘She’s magnificent,’ gasped Arthur Balstoun; ‘did you say you knew her.’

‘No, I didn’t; why?’

‘Don’t you think we could get introduced to her.’

The aide-de-camp gave quite a shout of laughter.

‘Spriggins, you are as wicked as even you can be.’

‘Don’t be an ass, Joe, don’t talk nonsense; I think she’s the best looking woman I ever saw.’

‘Well, can’t you be content with looking at her, then.’

‘I must know her, I must be introduced to her,’ declared the Captain, stoutly. ‘You must know the manager or someone, don’t you.’

‘Well, what then?’

‘You can go and see him, and take me with you, can’t you?’

‘Il n’y a pire eau que l’eau qui dort,’ said the aide-de-camp. ‘We’ll go after this song, if you like; there’s an interval. I know the manager, as you call him.’

The aide-de-camp was on friendly terms with all sorts and conditions of men, including all the great lights of the theatrical world, who liked to stand well at Government House. The individual who was responsible for the present performance was a florid and voluble man of fifty: he received the aide-de-camp with effusiveness, and declared himself honoured by becoming acquainted with Captain Balstoun.

‘But it’s too bad of you,’ he went on, addressing the former, ‘to pay for your seat. You know you are always welcome where I’m in charge. Next time you feel disposed to pay us a visit, Captain Bal-

stoun, I beg you'll let me have the pleasure of putting a seat at your disposal.'

Arthur Balstoun was much obliged. He said he hoped to bestow that pleasure—and to enjoy it. The aide-de-camp went then to the point, for time was passing.

'Miss Mirabel has a splendid voice.'

'Ah, I believe you,' said the *impresario*, proudly. 'You never heard a finer in the old country, I'll be bound.'

'No. Is she English?'

'Certainly; but I believe she has only sung in the provinces at present.'

'I never saw her before: she's decidedly an acquisition. She looks charming.'

'And she is so. Come and let me introduce you to her. I should like you to know her.'

He led the way into a side room where the lady was waiting her next turn to

sing, and in due form the two gentlemen were presented. The aide-de-camp talked to the *impressario*, and meanwhile watched in a convenient glass the antics of Captain Balstoun, who stood behind him in a great state of nervous agitation. The steady gaze of Miss Mirabel's grey eyes kept the Captain at a high pitch of excitement.

‘I hope I shall hear you sing often while I am here.’ He panted rather than spoke, twisting his yellow moustache.

‘It will be very good of you to come. Do you stay here long?’

‘Yes, I hope so: that is, I go away to-morrow.’ Miss Mirabel laughed, and he hastened to explain, ‘I mean I am going up country to-morrow to stay a week or two; but I shall come back again.’

‘I go on to Melbourne at the end of the month.’

‘Then I shall hope to see you there. I shall go there.’

Miss Mirabel apparently had no objection to raise, and the Captain was vastly pleased with his success. She was the most charming creature he had ever seen. He felt a strong inclination to invent a reason for remaining in Sydney instead of going to stay with the Governor.

He refrained, however. Next morning, after spending a restless night, he composed his feelings as well as he could, and submitted to be taken off into the hills. Here for the space of a fortnight he smothered his infatuation more or less successfully, but gave his host and hostess the impression that insanity was really developing within him. It was rather a relief to them when he left the house, though it was impossible not to feel sorry on his account : he really seemed unfit in

such an excitable state to travel about alone. This was the opinion of his Excellency's wife ; but the aide-de-camp reassured her. He had known Spriggins many years ; he would never come to any serious harm.

So the Captain went to Melbourne. It is not necessary to enter upon a full description of his proceedings there, because they have no particular bearing on our story, beyond this, that his passion for Miss Mirabel increased and was multiplied. He attended every concert at which she performed ; presented her with gorgeous bouquets ; fluttered round her with restless assiduity. She treated him with considerable kindness, and the Captain had no reason to consider himself snubbed ; but, try as he would, he could elicit no invitation to visit her. He could not even make out where she lived, beyond vaguely

understanding the neighbourhood,—with whom she kept house, with mother, sister, or nobody at all; this he could not learn. There was never an allusion to ‘we’ and ‘our,’ and from the general tenor of her talk it was to be presumed that she stood alone in the world.

She seemed to have a number of acquaintances with whom she was on good terms; and not a few admirers, whom she kept at arm’s length. Arthur was occasionally vexed by the presence of one or another rival. Such as they were, she treated them with the same friendly unconcern as she showed towards him. On one occasion an obtrusive gallant, who had been refreshing himself to excess, wished to bestow some attentions upon her as she was leaving a concert-hall. Arthur arrived at the right moment, and relieved her of her embarrassment. It was a point in

his favour ; but, though she was evidently grateful and appreciative, she unbent but little, and admitted him no further into her confidence, whatever may have been his advance in favour. He remained nothing better than a hanger-on. She seemed to prefer entire independence ; she showed no need of human sympathy.

At all events, the Captain consoled himself with the persuasion that she was not married. He could not muster up sufficient courage to prosecute his attentions further than she encouraged them : he had to be content with broken interviews in public places, and persuade himself that no man could look for more. Once or twice they met in the botanical gardens. This was indeed joy for Spriggins. They sat then in one of the wooden pavilions more or less alone, and the lady permitted her admirer to confide to her much of his

personal history, giving but little of her own in exchange.

It was not the height of season in Melbourne, and Miss Mirabel's engagements were proportionately modified. Before long she would be going elsewhere: in a short time Arthur Balstoun must be sailing for Europe. He told her all his plans; in which ship his passage was taken; his sorrow at the prospect of leave-taking; many things sentimental and personal.

One afternoon they were sitting thus, in the splendid gardens which redeem Melbourne from utter ugliness. The grass was burnt to ashes, but the prospect still was fair. Arthur Balstoun was like a depressed canary bird; all the twitter and chirp was gone out of him. The day of parting drew nigh, and his devoted soul was vexed. Miss Mirabel was herself unmoved; clearly not glad that he was going,

apparently not particularly sorry. She was an enigma to the Captain—irresistible, impenetrable, unapproachable.

Presently she said, with as little emphasis as possible,

‘I am thinking of going to England again to try my fortune.’

Arthur Balstoun started.

‘That’s what I’ve begged you to do. It’s what you ought to do. Come at once : come on our ship.’

‘That’s what I thought of doing.’

Arthur leapt to his feet; his delight was unbounded, and ought to have made an impression on Miss Mirabel; but it did not.

‘Let me go at once,’ said he, ‘and get you a berth. You ought to lose no time.’

‘I have already taken one,’ answered Miss Mirabel, complacently.

‘Why didn’t you tell me this before?’ demanded Arthur.

‘ I didn’t know you would care to hear it,’ she said, naively.

Of course Arthur broke into a perfect babble of protest, and left the gardens presently, the happiest man in the southern hemisphere.

Miss Mirabel’s last performance took place two nights before the date of sailing. The hall was well filled, and her reception was most flattering. She seemed pleased ; Arthur Balstoun beamed from his stall, and everything was as charming as possible.

After the performance Arthur hung about, *more suo*, to take an affectionate farewell of his charmer, and see her safely into the tramcar by which she elected to go home. She never allowed him to accompany her, and it was not in his nature, under these circumstances, to follow her.

On this occasion he felt a desperate desire to throw himself at her feet. His

passion had been inflamed by the brilliancy of her success; at the moment he positively worshipped her. He was in the mood to plunge blindly, and waited with impatience for her appearance. She came just as a tram-car with green light and loud-ringing bell approached.

‘That is my tram,’ she said, as complacently as if they had been out for a walk; there was not a symptom of triumph in voice or face.

Arthur pressed near to her, and whispered,

‘I’ve got such a lot to say to you; may I come part of the way?’

The tram-car had stopped; she paid no attention to his remark.

‘Good-night, Captain Balstoun; thank you,’ she said, in her usual formula.

She stepped on board, and was carried away into the darkness. Poor Arthur was

left raging with disappointment. He put a cigar into his mouth, but forgot to light it; then he started off, walking so rapidly and heedlessly that he far overshot his proper turning, and ended by making a midnight excursion of great length. This cooled him: he returned to the club, drank a glass of iced water, and went to bed in a more temperate frame of mind.

‘After all,’ he thought, as he went to sleep, ‘there are six weeks coming, dating from to-morrow as it’s now past midnight, when she can’t get out of my way very well.’

Hitherto he had never seriously contemplated making Miss Mirabel an offer of marriage: it was far beyond the reach of his audacity to present to his brother, Sir John, a professional singer for a sister-in-law. He lived in strict awe of the Baronet, and to risk his disapproval was an un-

dreamed-of extremity. Spriggins knew very well what he would say of such an alliance, and he felt that, under the circumstances, marriage would be regarded as the worst manner of composing the affair. The prospect of leaving Miss Mirabel he had regarded in the light of a necessary hardship. He now looked upon her companionship on board ship as an unlooked-for stroke of good-fortune.

Anyone who has spent some weeks at sea is familiar with the hourly facilities for carrying on a flirtation. There was nothing to prevent Captain Balstoun from placing his chair always beside that of Miss Mirabel; from walking on the deck with her; from sitting in the saloon with her; from spending the entire day with her from week's end to week's end. This state of things began as soon as the great ship went steaming smoothly out of St.

George's Sound. It may have been interrupted in the plunging waters of the Australian Bight, but by the time they had crossed the Indian Ocean and spent a day ashore at Colombo, Arthur Balstoun had gained so much assurance, or so far lost self-control, that he had asked her to become his wife.

It was at this juncture that Miss Mirabel's difficulties had begun. Captain Balstoun was not exactly a rich man, yet he was tolerably well off; he could at all events offer her a desirable position in the world; and the prospect of such a change from the routine of her hard-working life was alluring. And yet she was not free. No, she had told him, very kindly, she could not accept him now. Arthur was greatly distressed. What was the obstacle?

She was alone in the world. Why not

accept a home and haven with him? Did she not care for him, or was she already bound? Yes, that was it, she shyly confessed that at present she could not in honour accept any offer. Arthur could not help pressing the point, who was the other man? was he now in England or Australia? was her engagement to him really binding, or only a long-standing tie more of sentiment than serious intention. Miss Mirabel was reticent. She was not indifferent to Arthur Balstoun's devotion, but he must not press her any further.

In this condition they reached England, and Miss Mirabel went into apartments in London, with a view to finding an opening for her future career. Arthur Balstoun went to stay with his brother. There he found that demand existed for a lady to act as Agatha's governess, and keep the establishment in order, the late governess

having died suddenly. Arthur was so loud and strong in his praises of Miss Mirabel that Sir John consented to get her interviewed by some competent adviser in London; and in the event, she became installed at Balstoun in the capacity in which we have found her.

From that day Miss Mirabel set herself a task. To be efficient in her duties and deserving of Sir John's confidence should have been her object surely. By all means, but underneath the sweet and equable demeanour lurked no less a purpose than that of making herself Sir John's wife. That had been her game throughout. She had told Spriggins she was already bound, that's true. Whether or no that were a fact, she had resolved to break her ties in the Baronet's favour; and meanwhile, with adroitness which did credit to her head if not her heart, she kept hold

of the Captain as a second string. More than once, in fact, at short intervals, he appealed against her obduracy, but she never relented. The obstacle, she declared, still existed. Then Arthur would beg that if it should disappear she would tell him; and this, not without secret amusement, perhaps, she generously consented to do.

Miss Mirabel's feelings may be conceived, therefore, when she heard Sir John proposing in form to that odious little widow. Poor Miss Mirabel! the castle of cards had tumbled in an instant; the castle in the air had been blown away at a breath.

Now we know who Miss Mirabel was, where she came from, and what her position was in Balstoun Castle; and fortified by this information we shall be better able to follow our interesting story.

CHAPTER VI.

SIR JOHN AND HIS SON COME INTO COLLISION.

EVERY household is said to have its skeleton. It is an elegant idea that—of a bundle of bleached and rattling bones that will make themselves heard now and then, and can never be buried quite away out of sight. And if every house has its veritable skeleton, it must have a veritable cupboard in which to keep it. At Balstoun Castle the small library was destined to become such a charnel-house or bone den.

Nothing could have been less suggestive

of a charnel-house than this was, when Jack Balstoun and Mrs. Dasent occupied it, the latter recounting to her lover Sir John's unexpected behaviour. Two better specimens of youth, and life, and physical beauty need not be imagined; there was nothing of dry bones and death's heads there.

‘And so, Jack,’ Mrs. Dasent said, as she finished her story, ‘whatever you said or didn't say, Sir John evidently knows all about it, and what is much better, and to me much more wonderful,’ (and she looked very demure), ‘he entirely approves.’

Jack Balstoun was amazed. He recalled his interview with his father, and tried to make out that he had really let fall more than he imagined. In conscience he could not so persuade himself with exactness and in detail; but the will being a prolific

parent of belief, he easily arrived at the conclusion that Sir John had detected his secret, and had taken this delicate means of imparting encouragement to his intention.

While this interview was in progress, Sir John had been fidgetting about the house in search of Mrs. Dasent. He had been scrupulously exact in his personal adornment this morning. His dress was careful; he had taken a long scrutiny of his face in the glass as he trimmed his short beard. He was no longer young; never mind, he was an uncommonly good-looking fellow, and, despite grey hairs, there was nothing of the fogey about him. He was in a splendid temper, and prepared to be more than civil to all and sundry. Even Freddy White corrected him with impunity on a point of Balstoun history, and he only laughed instead of

being angry at Spriggins, who was suffering this morning from a more than usually acute attack of nervous affability.

He got rather bored with Mr. Flap, however, who seemed to be in an enquiring mood. Mrs. Joyce had gone upstairs, and the Professor was disconsolate. He had made overtures of friendship to Mr. Joyce, her husband, but their two minds could by no means fall into accord; so he was driven to tax his host's patience by insisting upon a little sight-seeing. At another time Sir John would have been delighted, but to-day stronger interests engaged his mind, and he eventually violated custom so far as to delegate the duties of showman to Freddy White.

'I ought to be very proud,' said the Foreign Office clerk: 'my cousin never likes anyone but himself to take people round; besides, he hates being put right,

and as I contradicted him flat this morning, it's all the more singular that I should be favoured. Let us make the most of it, Professor.'

Having rid himself of encumbrances, Sir John pursued his search for Mrs. Dasent. The only person he could find was Miss Mirabel, who seemed ubiquitous. The tiresome woman was constantly appearing round corners and in doorways, and as Sir John felt as guilty and self-conscious as a mischievous school-boy, these sudden encounters were provoking. She had seen Mrs. Dasent go into the library: now she was determined to follow the movements of Sir John, and she was disposed to find a certain amount of consolation in the fact that they were not together for the present, at all events.

Sir John went from room to room, until by a process of exhaustion he left none

unexplored except the library. Humming a tune vigorously, as people do when they want to seem very calm, he went to the little library door.

It was a pity, perhaps, that he was not humming still louder, so that a warning note or two might have penetrated into the sanctum. As it was, the door opened suddenly; and there Sir John beheld the lady who had consented last night, as he believed, to become his wife, posed in such a manner as to excite displeasure in the breast of the least jealous man alive. In her new character of step-mother, a certain ease of bearing towards Jack might not be unpardonable, but this was beyond all reason. No step maternal affection could bring such a gleam into her eyes, such a smile to her lips. One glance at her face excluded all interpretations save one;—it was her lover to whom she clung.

This mortifying truth was evident enough; he had a favoured rival, and who should that rival be but his own son. His indignation, it need not be affirmed, was great; but conceive his amazement when he found that the lovers showed little or no sign of confusion. A becoming blush mantled the cheeks of Mrs. Dasent, and Jack looked a little shy, but of terror and shame there was no trace at all. Here was bare-faced bravado beyond belief.

‘Good God!’ exclaimed the Baronet; then an appalling silence fell.

Jack’s hand and Mrs. Dasent’s slipped guiltily apart; they had no reason for being ashamed, but the Baronet’s face and fierce exclamation would have shaken anybody’s confidence.

‘Good God,’ he repeated, ‘do you dare to play fast-and-loose with me like that?’

It was a momentary outbreak only, Sir John was not given to vulgar exhibitions of rage, and after the first violence of his indignation, he regained his outward calm. But he was fuming inwardly. If he had found that Mrs. Dasent was swindling him out of money, or that Jack contemplated patricide, he would not have minded so much; for human nature is not immaculate, and any one may become the victim of baseness: but that anybody should make a fool of him was scarcely credible, and was certainly intolerable. There was no disguising it: here stood Mrs. Dasent, on whom he had designed to confer the title of Lady Balstoun, engaged in love passages with his son. It appeared that she was determined to reach the promised distinction, and for fear of any default on the part of the Baronet, was securing also the devotion of the

Baronet's heir. Such did Sir John believe to be the true position, and he hated her incontinently.

As to Jack, he had hardly considered him yet. He had only eyes for the wicked woman before him, and towards her he would have no mercy. He was not going to abuse her bargee-wise: he preferred a more dignified manner of marking his displeasure; and conceiving that justice demanded scant ceremony in dealing with such a person, he was debating how best to crush her, when she herself broke silence.

‘Why do you speak like that, Sir John? What have I done?’

‘You have deceived me in a very deliberate manner.’

Mrs. Dasent's mind turned to her back history; had some legend of the past been invented to interfere with her present good fortune.

‘You have heard something of me. Some one has been telling you stories : let me know what they are. They cannot be true.’

‘I have not spoken about you to anybody. I want nothing beyond the evidence of my eyes to condemn you.’

Then Jack spoke.

‘Mrs. Dasent has promised to be my wife,’ he said, stoutly: ‘whatever you may have to say to that, you must not insult her.’

Sir John kept his temper beautifully.

‘My dear boy, your chivalry does you credit. You would be sorry of course to doubt Mrs. Dasent’s sincerity : you might not like to believe me if I told you that I had ventured to make a similar proposal to her, and that she had accepted me also. It sounds ridiculous, but I assure you it’s true.’

‘Father, you are not in earnest.’

‘I am perfectly in earnest; so are you, no doubt. It is only Mrs. Dasent who is not serious.’

Mrs. Dasent gave a cry that sounded much like a laugh. She stepped up to Sir John with a curious mixture of shyness and humour in her face.

‘Oh, Sir John,’ she said, ‘it’s my fault.’

He drew back, and she went on timidly,

‘I thought when you spoke to me that you meant Jack. I had no notion you meant yourself—I had never expected that.’

‘Does that mean you decide now to choose Jack.’

He could not conceal a little sneer.

‘That’s not kind—it is not fair.’

She cast down her eyes and looked as though she were inclined to cry.

Jack Balstoun could not endure the

sight of her distress, and he gallantly came to her assistance.

‘I don’t know what you said to one another,’ he exclaimed to his father: ‘this I do know, that I had engaged myself to Mrs. Dasent before you spoke to her. I told her I would see you at once. I did try; but I didn’t manage to tell you about it. Under the circumstances it was not wonderful that she should have misunderstood you.’

‘You made good use of your twenty-first birthday,’ said Sir John. ‘I must congratulate you, I suppose, on being more fortunate than your father.’

His words were fair enough, but the face was stern, almost fierce. The lips were firmly set in two narrow lines.

Mrs. Dasent’s courage began to give way; this treatment was so entirely unexpected that it unnerved her.

‘Sir John,’ she exclaimed, piteously, ‘why are you so angry? Jack has asked me to be his wife; I have said yes, because I love him. If that displeases you, well, perhaps I ought not to complain. Perhaps I ought to have said no at once; I would have done so if I had been sure it were for his good. But I cannot believe so much happiness would be put within our reach if it were wrong for us to take it. If I believe I can make his life happy by doing that which he asks of me, I am surely not utterly to blame for consenting. I am sorry if I have offended you; but indeed I have done nothing dishonest. My heart was so filled with Jack, that when you spoke kindly to me I imagined you were speaking of him: it was what I was wishing for most. You surely are not angry with me for that.’

This appeal was made so winningly

that no man, unless he were a brute, could have heard it unmoved. Sir John was no brute, and it penetrated somewhere into the softer regions. None the less, he was mortified: his dignity had been offended. Pride is a noble thing, but it is not absolutely distinct from selfishness.

The cause of his dudgeon was plain enough. He had not been fooled exactly, he had been allowed to make a fool of himself, which was worse; and he morally retired into himself and stuck out all his bristles like a hedgehog, if one may compare Sir John Balstoun to a hedgehog. This was his attitude, and whether it deserved the name of pride or selfishness, let each of us determine to our liking.

Jack Balstoun felt that he was leaving all the work to Constance Dasent, and he presently cut in:

‘Father, I am very sorry you have been

disappointed,' he said; then Sir John winced, and his son abruptly altered the invidious word. 'Annoyed, I mean. It all arose from my stupidity. I should have told you everything yesterday, as I promised her I would.'

'It's very unfortunate, certainly; it would have been better for everyone.'

'I hope, now, you won't mind. You'll consent, won't you?'

'I am afraid I can't. This affair seems to me to require consideration; it takes me by surprise.'

'But I am of age.'

'I am quite aware of that.'

'Then why should you object?'

'It is usual to consider the desirability of any engagement that a young man intends to make.'

'You can't raise objections in this case,' exclaimed Jack, with an irresistible sense

of humour, 'for you wished to make the lady your own wife.'

It was most impolitic: instead of soothing his father, he had struck full on his sore place.

'A parent has an undoubted right of exercising his discretion in these matters,' he said, sharply. 'I am entitled to exercise mine.'

'Does that mean you won't say you approve?' demanded Jack, indignantly.

'I have nothing more to say,' replied the Baronet; and without further ceremony he left the room.

No thunder-storm rolling up into a summer sky ever produced such an eclipse of sunshine as did this behaviour on the part of Sir John Balstoun. Bewildering happiness gave way to abject gloom when Jack and Mrs. Dasent found themselves alone.

'I thought it was all so smooth for us,'

said Mrs. Dasent, 'and all the time we were cheating ourselves;' and she sat down dejectedly.

Jack was no less disappointed, to be sure; but to his great credit, be it said, he was sorry for his father. It should argue a large mind that in such a crisis he could feel even a touch of altruism.

"The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley," he said. 'Love's blind, or I ought not to have jumped at conclusions. Never mind, Con, it's something to have come to close quarters: we know where we are now.'

'But it's not very cheerful knowledge,' said Mrs. Dasent, with a sad little smile.

'Don't be down-hearted, darling,' exclaimed the ardent young man. 'You don't suppose I am going to be thwarted? We want time and courage, that's all. Naturally father is put out. Why, you of

all people ought to make allowances for him. Suppose I were to find I had been misunderstanding you all this time, should not I deserve pity? I think father is very much to be pitied, poor old boy.'

'It's not the same thing, Jack. Oh, yes, I am dreadfully concerned on his account—in a respectful manner; but he doesn't care for me as I want you to care for me. He isn't unhappy at losing me in the same way as I think you would be unhappy.'

Jack bent over her, his face flushing with proud determination.

'I shan't lose you,' he said, holding her hand in his. 'As long as we both live, no man shall keep us apart. My father shan't. I defy him. No, I won't say that yet. I defy Fate: there!'

She put her fingers to his lips.

'Hush,' she said, 'Jack, you mustn't; it will bring bad luck.'

‘What a superstitious thing you are,’ laughed Jack. ‘You were afraid of Miss Mirabel a little while ago, now you are afraid of Fate : what next?’

She sat silent, caressing his hand with hers. Presently she smiled up at him through her tears.

‘Your father can effectually separate us when my lease falls in.’

‘Oh, that’s absurd,’ said Jack ; ‘he wouldn’t drive you away.’

‘Then I ought to retire of my own accord.’

‘Con, you are fond of taking a gloomy view of things. We don’t know yet that my father is going to be troublesome : we do know that, if he is, we are not going to give way. Don’t look so sad, dear : don’t let us have tears before there’s need of them.’

‘I have learned to expect the worst in every case,’ said Mrs. Dasent. ‘Oh, Jack,

I hope I sha'n't bring my bad luck into your life.'

He answered her fondly ; and there was strength in him such as is good to perceive in a man.

'Come, that's not the way to get over a difficulty. Do you doubt me? You need not. You and I are to put our lives together. There will be rubs, I suppose, and sorrows sometimes ; we are going to meet them bravely, are we not? Then don't let us begin by wavering ; let's be plucky, and trust one another through thick and thin.'

'I will be brave,' she said ; and she added, gently, 'I think I can learn from you.'

The household festivities proceeded without apparent interruption. The remainder of the week was occupied with dinners and balls : speeches were made, and all the

ceremony due to such a great occasion was observed. Professor Flap and Mrs. Joyce flirted outrageously; Clarence Prigg showed off his accomplishments to all such as would attend; Freddy White drew Spriggins at intervals; and generally people seemed to be contented. But for the hero of it all, and for Mrs. Dasent, there was no more enjoyment; in the words of the humorist, 'the subsequent proceedings interested them no more.' Mrs. Dasent found the strain unendurable: how could she play her part in such company when her wish was to seek the quiet of her little home, and there wait the event of the crisis. As for Jack, he had gone to his father with a stout heart to resume negotiations, but the Baronet had put him off.

'Better say nothing more while the house is full; wait till these people have gone and we have time to ourselves.'

So the days passed without matters advancing. Jack was not exactly unhappy; youth is sanguine, and it takes much to depress a favoured suitor. The fever was in his veins, and kept his spirits in a delicious tumult. Poor Constance Dasent had to contend with evil forebodings born of past disillusionings; she was inclined to take a hopeless view, and ardently longed for an end to her suspense.'

Miss Mirabel was puzzled. She could in no way account for the unmistakable sadness of one whom Fortune had especially favoured. Judged from every point of view, Mrs. Dasent ought to be exhibiting symptoms of triumph, yet she was clearly miserable. At one time she had contemplated bagging Captain Arthur; at any moment she could bring him into her net, as she very well knew. Then in her rage she vowed to intercept the current

between Sir John and his chosen bride, and by stratagem to keep them apart. Next, to her lynx eyes, appeared the evidence that some power unknown had saved her this trouble. It was impossible to think that she had dreamt, instead of having heard, the dialogue at the window; manifestly Sir John had repented, or the widow had unaccountably raised difficulties. Miss Mirabel inclined to the former alternative, and prudently drew tight again the rein which she had a little relaxed in her control of Arthur Balstoun. A game, she reflected, is never lost till it is won.

CHAPTER VII.

MISS MIRABEL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

It has been said that Sir John Balstoun was essentially a just man. Whatever he considered to be due, that he conceded : but beyond that he never felt called upon to go. In the present crisis, this system came into full force. Upon review, he determined that he was justified in protesting against Jack's proposed marriage : it was a parent's undoubted privilege. He had certainly designed marrying the lady himself, but he could afford to do things which his son could not. When Jack

reached a ripe age, with a distinguished career behind him, he would be able to create his own standard of dignity ; meanwhile he had to make good his position, and, to the accomplishment of this, his intended alliance would be an obvious impediment.

Mrs. Dasent had a past that was not unclouded, though her own conduct had been clear as sunshine : that was one drawback. In the next place, she was older than Jack by two years at least, possibly more. Her marriage had happened about five years ago, and, though she was then not above eighteen, she could not now be anything less than three-and-twenty. Sir John was therefore positively within his strict right when he refused his countenance. On the other hand, there was no vital objection to it : the lady was blameless and charming, and Jack was in earnest. A little gener-

osity might have assured consent, but Sir John revolted from the idea. He could never look his daughter-in-law in the face after what had occurred: consequently he fell back upon the first considerations, and told his son he could never give approval.

Jack argued stoutly, but in vain. Strong words followed, and a rupture was threatened. He regarded his father as an unfeeling tyrant without bowels of compassion. Yet, hard as he may have been, Sir John was not unfeeling. Late at night the Baronet would sit alone brooding gloomily. He loved his son; but, because he was his son, he required of him before all things that he should respect his station in life. He could not bear to think of that son as backward or poor-spirited. Domestic calm and rustic simplicity were not worthy of a Balstoun, and he could not bring himself to regard with composure such a

future as Jack seemed to be preparing for himself. Jack had some ground for railing against his father, but he ought to have made allowances for the honest pride and affection which were mixed up with jealousy and selfishness. The son suffered most, but the father was not free from gnawing trouble on his part.

So everything was unsettled and uncomfortable: Sir John and his son hardly on speaking terms; Agatha unable to make out what was the matter, but for their sakes distressed; Miss Mirabel unable to make out what had happened, and for her own sake distressed: both these latter bent on clearing up the mystery and putting things to rights, but from different motives.

Mrs. Dasent in her own home passed her days sadly, wondering what she ought to do; still seeing Jack daily, and alter-

nating between gleams of hope and black despair. It was painful to see Agatha, because she would have made such a helpful confidante, and under the circumstances it was even necessary to deceive her. Agatha would come and talk about the trouble that seemed afloat at home, in the hope that Mrs. Dasent could throw some light upon it, which, though easy, was exactly what she must not do.

Jack, of course, was full of confidence. Give time, and the victory must be theirs; Sir John would surrender when he saw resistance was unavailing. So the world went round, and their little comedy proceeded, though the action for the moment was slow. Until one day it received an impetus, under which the entire aspect of it was altered.

Mrs. Dasent had received several visits from Miss Mirabel. She used to come with

a purpose in the morning, or for the sake of a friendly cup of tea in the afternoon. Whichever it might be, she would stay long, and ever displayed a tendency to be confidential. In vain Mrs. Dasent recoiled, and tried to put a moral barrier between her persecutor and herself: Miss Mirabel insinuated herself in spite of all, and Mrs. Dasent felt her conscience being picked to pieces without being better able to help herself than is a rabbit under the eye of a serpent.

Miss Mirabel longed to know more of dear Mrs. Dasent. Situated as she was, it would be an incomparable boon to find a sympathetic friend: she was so fond of Mrs. Dasent; it was impossible not to desire a closer intimacy. It was all Mrs. Dasent could do to prevent every scrap of personal history slipping from her; she had a strong disinclination to be drawn

out like this. Her cheerless girlhood, her ill-starred marriage, were not to be discussed with an acquaintance not very well known and not by any means trusted—one who knew nothing at present beyond the fact that she was a widow with something of a ‘past.’

Shortly after the coming of age festivities, Agatha went to London. She was to enter the world under an aunt’s auspices; and, now that the hour had arrived, the prospect which had appeared so alluring suddenly grew dark. She was a little homesick at the bare idea of leaving beloved Balstoun. It was a sad reflection that the hay would be mown and carted without her to see it done; that the light summer clouds would be flying over the wide downs, and she would not be cantering there. There would be no placid evenings spent in cheerful gossip round the great

fountain; this summer she would be in crowded, hurried London, in the midst of strange faces, changing all her views of life. She came down to breakfast in the humour of a schoolboy on the last day of holidays. Sir John seemed inclined to treat her with special respect, and made conversation for her, as an attention due on his part to any lady in Society.

Uncle Arthur was to be her escort. Miss Mirabel had expressed a great desire to take darling Agatha to London, but had incidentally named so many difficulties in the way that she had allowed herself to be dissuaded. As a matter of fact, she had not the least intention of leaving Sir John at home unwatched.

‘Give my love to Aunt Jane,’ said Jack, ‘and mind she treats you kindly.’

‘Positively you won’t come?’ asked Agatha.

‘No,’ said Jack, bluntly, and went on with his breakfast.

‘I think you are wrong, Jack,’ said Arthur Balstoun. ‘It doesn’t do to shut oneself up at your time of life.’

‘I wish I could shut you up, Spriggins. I’m not going.’

‘If I were John I should insist. You should make him go about more,’ he said to his brother.

‘It’s no business of mine,’ said the Baronet. ‘Jack is his own master: I have advised him to go about more; but if he prefers to stay at home he has a perfect right to do so.’

Jack said nothing, but looked sulky. He was tired of advice which he had no intention of taking, and he got up without finishing his breakfast and went away. Agatha found him presently in the gun-room.

‘Jack, dear,’ she said, ‘I didn’t mean to bother you, but you’ve been looking so unhappy I can’t bear to leave you here. I want you to come away with me, or let me know what’s the matter before I go.’

Jack continued polishing a pair of steel barrels. ‘What should be the matter?’ he asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know, but I’m sure there’s something. It isn’t that you are in love, or you would have told me. Is it money? Father seems angry, and I believe it must have something to do with Cambridge debts. Oh, Jack, can’t I make over my money to you? It won’t be mine till I’m of age, but surely it can be managed somehow.’

She blushed at her own goodness, and in her blue eyes rose large tears. Jack put down his gun and kissed her.

‘Dear little Agatha, what a brick you

are. No, I don't want any money. You can't help me, though I like to have your sympathy. Father and I have got to settle some things which are rather a bother, that's all: till it's done, I don't mean to leave home. Don't worry about me, go and enjoy yourself: and when you fall in love, choose a good chap.'

Agatha blushed again.

'I am not going to fall in love: I shan't bring you back a brother-in-law.'

'You'll see. Aunt Jane will attend to that. If she begins bothering, I'll come and fetch you home; so just let me know.'

Sir John dismissed his daughter politely.

'Give my love to your aunt. Tell her I hope to come to Town for a day or two later on. Remember me to all my friends.'

She accepted his stately kiss with humility; took a more effusive farewell

of Jack and Miss Mirabel, and was gone.

Jack's heart sank at the prospect of being left more continually alone with his father. The Baronet could act as though there were nothing between them; he was always friendly and unembarrassed, whereas Jack's young wrath manifested itself in a stilted formality. Sir John never enquired into his son's doings. He knew he could not prevent him from seeing Mrs. Dasent, so he neither required him to avoid her house, nor sought to know whether or when he went there. He could rely on it there would be no secret marriage.

When they were left alone on the terrace, he said, unaffectedly,

‘Will you drive with me to call on the Mayor of Waterdale? I think we owe him a visit.’

It was a matter of duty and Jack as-

sented, though the long drive into Waterdale promised to be a stiff affair.

‘Let us lunch early and start at two,’ said Sir John. ‘I must go through the young plantations this morning. Will you come with me?’

‘I think not, if you don’t mind. I shall have some things to do if I am to be away this afternoon.’

Sir John knew that his son would spend the morning with Mrs. Dasent; but he said nothing, and went about his business.

Jack found Mrs. Dasent amongst her flowers making her daily inspection. She drew off her thick garden glove, and gave him her hand without a word. A ring of small sapphires sparkled there; he put his finger on it as if to renew his pledge.

‘Agatha has gone,’ said Jack. ‘She told me to give you her love; so I’ve come to give it.’

She looked up at him and smiled, but not very cheerfully.

‘I am sorry she has gone,’ she said. ‘She couldn’t do us much good; but it was nice to have her near us. She is so sweet that she seemed helpful somehow.’

‘I am sorry,’ said Jack; ‘but, on the other hand, it is partly a relief. One had to keep her in the dark; besides, she might be in the way here. Now I shall always have you to myself.’

‘Not while Miss Mirabel is here. My dear, that creature never lets me alone.’

‘Don’t abuse poor old Mirabel. She means to be kind. Perhaps she rather over-does it; but it all comes from excess of gratitude.’

‘Why should she be grateful to me?’

‘She thinks you are a favourite of father’s, and whatever he likes she makes much of.’

‘I wonder whether she thinks Sir John might marry me, and wants to make sure of my good opinion.’

‘Not she; it wouldn’t occur to her.’

Mrs. Dasent turned away and cut off some dead leaves. ‘Did Sir John know you were coming here this morning?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know: I daresay he guessed. This afternoon I am to drive with him to Waterdale. I mean to have another go at him.’ She shook her head sadly, and he went on: ‘Well, it’s no use wasting time. We must have it out by degrees. A stone wears out if one keeps rubbing it; I must keep on at him.’

‘And if he doesn’t give in?’ said Mrs. Dasent.

‘He will give in all right. Don’t let us talk of trouble till trouble begins.’

Mrs. Dasent spoke again.

‘Jack, dear, I have been thinking of what I ought to do if Sir John is determined. I must never be the cause of a quarrel between you. I shall have to do what heroines of stories do sometimes—desert you.’

Her voice was full of sorrow, and his answer was passionate.

‘Listen, dear. If you were to go away, you would make our quarrel irreparable. I would never forgive my father for having made me lose you. I would never go into Balstoun again whilst he lived. I will give him time to consent; but if he refuses, after all, then I must put him at defiance. If you were to go away you would make matters worse than ever. He has no right to refuse. You are given to me by heaven, and no power on earth shall rob me of you.’

She was in a troubled state, poor lady,

and spent many hours in solitary grief; but when Jack was with her, full of hope and love and courage, she must needs let her spirits rise; and he left her happier than he found her.

After lunch, Sir John's phaeton appeared, and Miss Mirabel came to see them start.

'You'll be awfully lonely, I am afraid, without Agatha,' said Jack.

'I shall miss her,' said Miss Mirabel, sweetly; 'but I have plenty to do trying to keep your house comfortable. Besides, there is Mrs. Dasent; I am so fond of her.'

Jack felt himself reddening.

'Yes,' he said, 'you ought to be good company for one another.'

'She is not very strong,' said Miss Mirabel. 'Ever since she stayed here she has seemed tired out.'

'Has she? I don't suppose it's anything.'

‘I daresay you’ll call there this evening on the way home,’ surmised Miss Mirabel, and kept a shrewd eye on Jack as he answered.

As he entertained no suspicion of his interlocutor, he ran less risk of betraying himself than he might have done. He only answered that he did not know; and astute Mirabel satisfied herself that Jack at all events knew nothing of his father’s feelings towards Mrs. Dasent.

Sir John, in his wisdom, designed to treat his son in such a manner as to extend the horizon of his experience. His conversation now was such as he would use to any man who lived in his own set. When they started driving he talked of horses.

‘You will be well off this winter,’ he said. ‘You’ve got the two horses you had last year and the new one Arthur gave you

to begin with : I should go into a better country than this if I were you. Why don't you join some fellow and go down to Melton or Oakham, or one of those places ?'

'We shall see,' said Jack, guardedly.
'It's not bad fun here.'

'I have had great fun in old days,' went on the Baronet. 'I had a house three winters with poor old Archie Price, after we came back from the Crimea ; he got killed, you know, in a railway accident. I never had the heart to go there again afterwards. Now why don't you go with the present man : he's a friend of yours, isn't he ?'

'Oh, yes. I know him well.'

'Is he fond of hunting ?'

'He loves it.'

'Very well. Get him to join you, and go and enjoy yourself.'

'I shall be very happy here,' said Jack.

Sir John took no notice of this.

‘What a jolly place theirs is ; I used to think it was the most comfortable house in England ; don’t you ?’

‘I was only there once,’ said Jack, ‘and then there was a crowd of people I didn’t know ; so I was rather bored.’

‘They used to have capital parties in the old days,’ said the Baronet. ‘You should get him to ask you for the driving ; it’s some of the best I know. Then go and get a turn out of old Hamilton Hume next door ; that’s always good shooting. Upon my word you needn’t lack a good time as long as you are young and fit to get about.’

It was futile ; Jack sat in a reverie, hardly attending to what his father said. The light wind blew in his face, and he watched the shadows sweeping across the green crops. The phaeton rattled along,

scaring a flock of geese out of their siesta in front of the village ale-house ; past grey gothic churches hidden away in bowers of elm trees ; past great country houses and humble cottages ; through stretches of rolling uplands, green and golden with flowers and gorse ; under a bright heaven where the larks were hovering and singing : on they went, Sir John chatting gaily, Jack doggedly indifferent to everything but his one care.

The visit of ceremony was accomplished, and the horses' heads were turned homewards. Then Jack prepared for the attack.

‘ You talk about my going away shooting and hunting. I ought to tell you that I have no idea of moving until my engagement is a settled thing.’

‘ My dear fellow, do be reasonable,’ said Sir John, after a little pause. ‘ Of course you are very much infatuated ; I don’t

blame you for it, but you must see it won't do.'

'Why won't it do? Why should I not marry a lady who is exactly fitted to be my wife?'

'You must remember, Jack, that you have to occupy a certain position in the world. By all means keep your affection for Balstoun; no one will be better pleased than I; but don't ignore the world. What should I have been if I had made a humdrum marriage at twenty-one, and planted myself at home? It's a fatal mistake. If you marry now as you propose, you will never see anything of the world, and you'll bitterly repent your haste when it's too late.'

'It's my opinion,' said Jack, 'that if more people planted themselves at home, the British landowners wouldn't be such a shaky lot. I desire nothing better than

to be identified with Balstoun. If I have my home and my wife, I have all I want.'

'One thinks that when one is young.'

'And, please God, I'll think it still when I am old.'

'You wouldn't if you tried the experiment. You would have to find out all you had missed sooner or later.'

'I don't want to be disrespectful, but I deny your right to prevent my marriage with Mrs. Dasent; there is no valid objection to it.'

'That is a matter of opinion. She is not in the position your future wife ought to occupy; it wouldn't do at all. I've pointed out many times that she's much too old for you. It would be utterly unsuitable, and I should be much to blame if I gave my consent.'

'Then you mustn't be angry if I marry without it.'

Sir John began to draw in his lips.

‘Of course, if you mean to quarrel with me, I can’t help it.’

‘But haven’t you any consideration?’ said Jack, earnestly. ‘I am not asking you to sanction my marriage with a barmaid or a ballet-dancer. Mrs. Dasent’s family is as good as ours; I insult her even in making the comparison.’

‘She is a charming lady,’ said Sir John, coldly. ‘You appeal to my sentiment, but I’m afraid I haven’t got any. However charming she may be, I consider it out of the question that you should be engaged to her. Once for all, I refuse my consent.’

‘Let us quite understand each other, then,’ said Jack. ‘What will be my position if I marry without your consent?’

‘You must ask Mrs. Dasent that. You know what your position will be at my

death. During my lifetime you will have your wife's money. Agatha has all your mother's money; I am afraid I should not feel justified in doing very much for you. As a protest against your imprudence, I should refuse to increase your allowance. Of course you needn't fear starvation, but you mustn't expect much luxury in the life you contemplate.'

'Thank you,' answered Jack. 'I will let you know before I take any step.'

'I should like to say good-bye before you do so; I don't think it probable we should meet subsequently.'

And so they drove home, black care sitting up behind them alongside of the groom, who was trying hard to catch what they were saying to one another.

Meanwhile Miss Mirabel had elected, this afternoon, to pay a visit to dear Mrs. Dasent. She found her reading a novel

in the garden, and, as it was too early for tea, she sat down for a comfortable gossip. Mrs. Dasent shut her book and resigned herself to the ordeal.

‘How are you to-day?’ said Miss Mirabel, holding the widow’s hand. ‘Better? Wouldn’t you like to go for a drive? Sir John would be delighted to send a carriage for you, I know.’

‘It’s very kind of you,’ said Mrs. Dasent; ‘but I feel so tired, I think I would rather stop at home.’

‘I wish you would come more to the Castle. They always like having you there, and now Agatha has gone they would be all the more glad. Besides, it would do you good. You are too much alone.’

Mrs. Dasent only wished she were alone at that moment.

‘I think I am better here,’ she said.

‘Of course you are very comfortable;

you have made the house so pretty. Do you mean to make it your permanent home?’

‘I never look forward,’ said Mrs. Dasent. “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”’

‘Please don’t be so gloomy; I must try to rouse you. Surely you find plenty of interests? You are fond of books, and music, and you paint. I wonder you don’t travel sometimes. Why not go to Switzerland for a month: it would do you good.’

‘I have no one to go with, and I can’t afford it,’ said Mrs. Dasent, smiling wearily; ‘besides, I don’t want to go away.’

Miss Mirabel noted this confession.

‘Wouldn’t it be nice,’ she said, ‘if Sir John took it into his head to take Agatha, and we all went together?’

Mrs. Dasent shook her head.

‘It’s no use wishing for the moon,’ she said.

‘There’s nothing impossible in my suggestion,’ persisted her visitor.

But the widow again shook her head despondently, giving the other lady confidence in her opinion that some difficulty had unaccountably presented itself to the Baronet’s domestic projects, whereby the widow suffered deep disappointment. What this difficulty was, on which side it arose, and whether or not it was permanent, Miss Mirabel determined to ascertain.

‘You have never yet shown me your room,’ she went on. ‘Will you take me upstairs? I should like to see your things.’

Ladies, it seems, enjoy an exchange of wardrobe confidences; and though Mrs. Dasent felt little desire to show off her clothes just now, yet it seemed not un-

natural to give way. She put down her book and led the way upstairs. It was a tiny house, and Miss Mirabel had to bend her graceful head in turning some of the corners. Mrs. Dasent's bed-room was simple enough, but it bore many traces of its owner's taste. A few pieces of ribbon give an effect out of proportion to their modest cost, and the weeding of certain conventional horrors rid a room of much ugliness. The place of honour was occupied by a large photograph of her father—a grave, kind face not without dignity and beauty. Above the bed was fixed a small shelf, filled with volumes of poetry, of which the pages bore nearly as much impression of Mrs. Dasent's pencil as of printers' ink. A basin of flowers stood on a table at the bed's foot.

‘You have a genius for pretty things,’ said Miss Mirabel, looking round. ‘What

a dear little room ; what a sweet look-out. It's quite ideal !'

'It's not very magnificent,' said Mrs. Dasent.

'That's your cleverness : you do so much with so little. You spend nothing on your clothes, and you were the best-dressed woman at the coming-of-age party. Let me look at that dress you wore at dinner the first night, will you ? the one Lady Elizabeth said couldn't possibly have been made at Waterdale.'

The dress was produced, and Miss Mirabel showed the right amount of interest to ensure further admission into her friend's privacy. One drawer after another was examined, and one or two small facts were brought to light which were worth knowing. Nothing of importance transpired, however, until Miss Mirabel observed that, on opening a certain drawer, Mrs. Dasent

put aside a leather case, flat and square. She divined at once what this contained, and with unusual precipitancy, she exclaimed,

‘Dear Mrs. Dasent, you have never shown me a photograph of your husband; you must have one somewhere. May I not see it?’

She had never shown it to anybody except Jack. She certainly had no wish to show it to Miss Mirabel, but she had it in her hand, and at the moment could invent no excuse for refusing.

‘I never show it,’ she said, simply. ‘He did not like being photographed, and he only gave me this one, which was quite old at the time we were married.’

Miss Mirabel took the case and opened it. Her back was to the window, and Mrs. Dasent did not see the effect produced by the first glance at the face in the frame.

Miss Mirabel stood transfixed: her own face was white and she almost choked with excitement. It was several minutes before she closed the frame and put it down. She scarcely dared to speak. When she did, it was with such a trembling voice, that Mrs. Dasent could not help feeling that she was, after all, a sympathetic friend who entered fully into the sorrows of others. Miss Mirabel was evidently moved by the reflection conjured up by the image of the dead man.

She made rather an abrupt departure after this; she would not even wait for tea. Going homewards, she stopped at the village post-office and addressed a telegram to Captain Balstoun, Guards' Club, in these words:

'Make an excuse for coming back at once. I want you.'

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AFTER-DINNER CONVERSATION.

WHEN Sir John came down to breakfast next morning, he found with his letters a telegram from Arthur Balstoun, announcing his immediate return.

‘He’s in a great hurry to come back,’ ruminated the elder brother. ‘I hope he’s not done anything extra foolish.’

He told Miss Mirabel and Jack the bare fact, and made no comment on it. Jack was glad: he was fond of his uncle, and felt that, on the whole, he would help to ease the prevailing strain. Miss Mirabel said nothing, but she accepted the news gladly. Arthur’s arrival would enable

her to act; and she found the interval of waiting a tiresome prospect.

Towards the appointed hour she left the castle by a back way, and walked towards the lodge-gates. She had entertained no doubt that Arthur would obey her, but she listened impatiently for the sound of wheels. It came at last with the regular hammering of horses' hoofs, and the brougham appeared upon the avenue. Miss Mirabel emerged from the shadow of the trees, and presented herself. The Captain got out with alacrity, and the coachman left them together. The first words Miss Mirabel uttered when they were alone dashed Arthur's spirits rudely. He had travelled in a fever of expectation; for her message had seemed capable of only one interpretation—namely, that she had at last decided to accept him for a husband.

It had been a tedious journey, full to his fancy of unaccountable delays ; yet it had been sweetened by the conviction that great joy awaited him at the other end. He had conceived a number of scenes suitable for such a meeting as this ; he had prepared a selection of speeches ; and now, instead of a situation at once graceful and romantic, he found himself helplessly dumb, whilst Miss Mirabel said, in calm and business-like tones,

‘I’m glad you have come quickly ; it’s something that won’t keep.’

Poor Arthur Balstoun’s heart fell dead within him.

‘I thought you wanted to see me,’ he gasped. ‘I hoped it was on my own account——’

‘Dear Captain Balstoun, don’t let us be selfish ; we must not think wholly of ourselves. If we go and sit under the

trees we can talk without being disturbed.'

He followed her meekly, and took a seat to which she motioned him. Then she began.

'I turn to you, not only because you are my best friend, but because you are the soul of honour.'

He took her hand nervously, and she humoured him by not withdrawing it for a few moments.

'What has happened concerns Sir John; his honour is at stake.'

Arthur was alert now, for he was keen enough when the family honour was being talked about.

'Now,' went on Miss Mirabel, 'I must tell you something in confidence: you must give me your word to respect it; you mustn't ask me how I know.'

'Of course I promise,' said Arthur.

'A little while ago, Sir John proposed

to Mrs. Dasent, and she accepted him.'

Arthur gave a great start, but she put her hand on his sleeve, and continued :

'What happened next I don't know, but evidently there was a hitch : I thought, perhaps, he had repented, or she had offended him. Sir John seemed put out, and Mrs. Dasent was obviously disappointed : I wasn't surprised at that, but I wondered very much how it had happened. I know now : she daren't marry him though she wants to, because she isn't a widow at all : her husband is alive.'

'How did you find out that?' asked Arthur, in amazement.

'In a very simple way. Yesterday she showed me a photograph of her husband, and I knew him at once. You know him too : it's a man who used to persecute me in Australia. Don't you remember seeing him once outside the Melbourne Concert

Hall? He was tipsy : I told you all about him at the time.'

'I remember; but are you sure it's the same man?'

'Yes, I've got the same photograph. I saw a good deal of the creature: once he insisted on giving me his photograph, and somehow or other I have kept it. It is the same as the one Mrs. Dasent showed me.'

Arthur reflected a moment.

'Didn't it ever occur to you to connect the two men?'

'Certainly not; because, when Mr. Dasent left his wife, he took another name: I knew him as Dodd. He was always pestering me to marry him: oh, Captain Balstoun, supposing I had!'

'Of course you weren't going to marry a beast like that,' said the Captain, gallantly. 'But he must have forged a certificate of his own death.'

‘He must have done something of the kind, unless, of course, Mrs. Dasent was content to take his death for granted.’

Arthur spoke up stoutly : ‘I don’t believe for a moment she has been taking us in : don’t say that. She’s not a humbug, whatever she may be.’

At which speech Miss Mirabel smiled deprecatingly.

‘I don’t want to be hard on her,’ she said. ‘I am so sorry for her; but, of course, Sir John must be our first care. Mrs. Dasent may or may not believe in her husband’s death; in any case, Sir John must be warned.’

‘Of course he must,’ said Arthur.

‘And I thought you were the proper person to do it,’ said Miss Mirabel, with her most fascinating glance.

Loyalty and awe towards his brother wrestled in the breast of Arthur Balstoun.

He would never flinch from shielding the Baronet's honour ; but to confront him in this matter was a truly awful prospect. No man likes being taught his own folly : least of all men would Sir John Balstoun : and human nature is apt to be ungrateful towards the friend who saves us from our indiscretions.

Miss Mirabel was far too astute to risk the full brunt of such anger, and, if she must appear in the case at all, she prudently resolved that it should be after the first force had been expended on somebody else. No more obedient agent than Arthur could be found ; that is why she had honoured him with her confidence and commission ; but, although the poor man was proud to be her servant, he could not bring himself to regard her behest with complacency.

‘ You say she accepted him,’ said Arthur,

after an interval: 'and somehow it appeared to fall through.'

'Something certainly happened,' said Miss Mirabel.

'Then it probably isn't necessary for me to interfere,' suggested the Captain, with more discretion than valour.

'It wouldn't be safe to risk it. Mrs. Dasent began by accepting: she would marry Sir John if she could and dared.'

'You are assuming she is an adventuress. I don't believe she is.'

Miss Mirabel looked reproachful.

'Don't be unkind. I am only trying to help your brother: you need not abuse me for that.'

The Captain protested that nothing was further from his thoughts and wishes.

'Of course you are right, only I'm sure the lady is more deceived than deceiving. Tell me what I am to do.'

‘I have no right to dictate,’ said Miss Mirabel; ‘but I thought that, whatever was the case, you might tell your brother that you have seen Mrs. Dasent’s husband alive in Australia. You will have to say that the truth came out through my having seen his photograph in her house; beyond that you had better not mention me: it would annoy Sir John very much to think I had been meddling in his affairs.’

‘How considerate you are,’ murmured Arthur.

‘Of course you won’t breathe a word about his engagement: only say that, as she is so much in the house, the mystery about the husband ought perhaps to be cleared up for everybody’s sake. Then Sir John will be quite safe from any entanglement.’

Arthur reflected over his *rôle* for a little,

while Miss Mirabel watched him with a satisfied air.

‘I wonder if Dodd, or Dasent, or whatever his name is, is still alive?’ said the former.

This seemed to strike Miss Mirabel unpleasantly.

‘I can easily ascertain; I know his friends out there. But you may rely on it he is not one of the dying sort.’

‘He’s probably drunk himself to death by this time,’ said Arthur.

‘Oh, no; he’s been like this all his life—so they told me. He was never a slave to it, and he has a constitution that would stand anything.’

‘How would it be to find out that first?’ said Arthur, again inclined to hesitate.

‘At the risk of your brother being caught, meanwhile; surely, Captain Balstoun, you would not like that?’

‘Very well,’ said Arthur; ‘I will tell him.’

Miss Mirabel had gained her end, and was impatient for the next step. She rose to go, but her companion gently held her back.

‘When I got your telegram,’ he stammered, blushing like a girl, ‘I made sure you meant to marry me at last. You said you would send for me if ever you relented; isn’t there any hope?’

‘Dear friend, your loyalty makes me quite sad. I could only repay you by being disloyal myself. Poor waifs of life, such as I, go through many trials. We have our own kin and ties, but we are torn far apart, and our fidelity is put to many a test. You must remember my faith is pledged elsewhere; until I am deserted, I must not be led away by new attractions. You are so generous; you

mustn't blame me for what little goodness is left in me.'

Arthur's heart swelled with admiration.

'I will wait all my life if I may hope to win you some day,' he said; and he bent down and kissed her hand, whilst her languishing eyes grew mocking, and the smile on her lips was vixenish.

They walked home almost in silence, Miss Mirabel forgetting to ask after Agatha until they reached the Castle. Arthur had established her safely in Grosvenor Square, where doubtless she was in comfort. Miss Mirabel expressed her satisfaction, and hurried away to dress.

Arthur Balstoun had no wish to meet his male relations at the moment, so he too went upstairs and stayed there until the gong sounded.

'Well, Arthur,' exclaimed the Baronet, when they met, 'you didn't stay long

in London; what brought you back so quickly?’

‘I thought I would rather be here,’ said Arthur, twisting his moustache.

‘You’re very welcome, I’m sure. How’s London? Full?’

‘Same as usual: lots of fuss and very little fun, it seems to me.’

‘You are growing old, like the rest of us.’

‘Oh, no,’ exclaimed Arthur; ‘but I prefer spending my time and money where the fun is cheaper and more plentiful. I have had enough of London luxuries.’

‘Why, hang it,’ said Jack, ‘you’ve turned philosopher in twenty-four hours. I’m much obliged to you; I’ll profit by your experience, and stop away altogether.’

The butler threw open the folding doors beyond which appeared a round table covered with snow-white linen and shaded

lights. Sir John gave his arm to Miss Mirabel, and the party of four sat down to dinner.

Sir John had made no difference in his bearing towards Jack since yesterday ; he was agreeable as ever.

‘ I often pay my thanks to these ancestors of ours,’ he said, waving his hand towards the wall, ‘ for having repeatedly refused a peerage. I have become so wedded to country life that attendance in the House of Lords would be intolerably irksome. I’ve done my duty by sitting for the county ten years. Jack, you’ll have to take your turn by-and-by.’

‘ That’s not so easy now-a-days,’ said Arthur. ‘ They will elect some carpet-bagger or local tradesman, as likely as not.’

‘ I don’t see why I shouldn’t make myself as popular as any other local man,

let alone a carpet-bagger, if I take the pains,' said Jack.

'The Balstouns haven't been in the habit of going round cap in hand,' said Sir John, magnificently. 'I hope I shan't live to see one of them cadging for votes.'

'Or, worse still, to see one of them beaten,' said Arthur.

'That depends on what sort of a Balstoun he is,' said Jack. 'As long as he's known and liked, he ought to have as good a chance as anyone else.'

'I don't think a Balstoun need fear a rival at present,' said Miss Mirabel; but the remark was rather invidious, and Sir John changed the subject.

It was not a cheerful dinner: none of them were at their ease, and in place of the familiar talk which can make a small party in a country house so pleasant, a

laboured dialogue was kept up between Sir John and Miss Mirabel. Jack was silent because it was now his habit; Arthur was silent too, because he was contemplating his interview.

Miss Mirabel left them together. Then Sir John prepared for an ordeal which he never appreciated—a talk with his brother. They were very good friends, but throughout life there had been a mutual cause of vexation; their minds could not be got to run in the same groove. It was likely to be all the worse this evening, for Jack deserted them. When he had closed the door behind Miss Mirabel, he stood before the fire-place instead of sitting down. Sir John filled his glass and passed the decanter to Arthur.

‘Ring the bell, will you, Jack?’ he said.
‘We shall want another bottle; you are drinking claret, aren’t you?’

‘I don’t want any more, thanks,’ he said.

‘Don’t get any more for me,’ exclaimed Arthur.

‘I daresay our friends on the walls would be astonished at our temperance. They didn’t leave their claret so early,’ said Sir John.

‘You see they hadn’t invented cigarettes,’ said Jack, pulling a box from his pocket. ‘I prefer smoking in the air to drinking indoors.’ And he walked across to a door which led out to a terrace.

On the threshold he lit his cigarette, and stood with his back to the two men, looking out into the moonlight. Sir John watched him with a cross face: and when he stepped out, and was heard walking off along the terrace, the Baronet uttered a growl of disapproval.

‘He doesn’t think much of our company,’ he said.

Arthur fingered his wine-glass restlessly, and blurted out,

‘It doesn’t matter, I want to say a word to you in private.’

The Baronet said nothing, and looked so stern that the Captain’s courage wavered.

‘It’s nothing of great importance; perhaps it’s no business of mine; but I think you ought to know it, John.’

‘Well, my dear fellow, what is it?’

‘It’s about Mrs. Dasent, your neighbour. She seems to be here a great deal; I suppose you find her an acquisition. She appears to me to be charming: I should be sorry to believe a word against her.’

He was playing with a dessert knife now, at the risk of cutting his brother’s cloth and his own finger, and he failed to see the keen eyes which were turned towards him.

‘Very well, what about Mrs. Dasent?’ asked Sir John.

‘She’s not a widow, that’s all,’ said Arthur, desperately.

Sir John’s face seemed to contract; eyes and mouth were drawn in. He said nothing, and Arthur dashed on.

‘All I mean is, that you naturally wouldn’t like an impostor in the house. You have taken her up; and though, personally, I believe the poor woman is entirely innocent of deception, I daresay you would like to know all about her if she’s going to be a friend of yours.’

‘Who told you?’ asked Sir John, shortly.

‘Miss Mirabel made the discovery: oddly enough, I’ve seen the husband myself in Australia. Mrs. Dasent showed Miss Mirabel his photograph; Miss Mirabel knows it’s the same man, because she

has the same photograph. She told me, because she thought you ought to know; and I've told you;' with which inartistic conclusion Arthur looked up and met the Baronet's gaze.

In calmer moments, Sir John might have enquired why Miss Mirabel had not made this communication direct: now it seemed not to trouble him. He did not appear to care whether his brother had actually been summoned from London to tell him. Evidently he was not angry, his face gleamed with delight.

'The very thing,' he exclaimed. 'Arthur, you have done me a right good turn. I must tell you that Jack has got it into his head he wanted to marry Mrs. Dasent.'

Arthur gave a start: Miss Mirabel had been unaccountably misled. It was the

son then, not the father, who contemplated marrying the lady.

‘Of course it wouldn’t do,’ went on Sir John, ‘and for the last few days I’ve been trying to bring him to reason. But the boy is so infatuated, I believe he would try and have his way. Now the lady turns out to have a husband, he can’t: it’s the luckiest thing in the world.’

Arthur looked grave.

‘Poor boy,’ he said, ‘I am sorry for that. He’ll take it to heart.’

‘My dear fellow, don’t talk nonsense,’ said the Baronet, angrily. ‘By Jove, I’m indebted to you for rescuing us all from a mess.’

Arthur had by no means the air of gratification.

‘Poor old Jack,’ he muttered; ‘I am sorry.’ Then he added, aloud—

‘One can’t be sure the man’s still alive : he may have died since I saw him.’

‘How can we find out?’ asked the Baronet.

‘Miss Mirabel says she can do it,’ replied his brother.

Sir John got up.

‘Come into the drawing-room,’ he said.
‘I must talk to Miss Mirabel.’

Arthur Balstoun was crestfallen. He had brought Miss Mirabel to the front of the scene contrary to her instructions, and he had apparently provided the means of crushing Jack’s main idea of happiness. He followed his brother from the room in a most dejected mood.

Miss Mirabel was sitting in a low chair doing needlework : she looked up and smiled as the two brothers entered. At a glance she saw that Arthur had been as good as his word, and she bent over her work again to hide her agitation.

Sir John walked up to the fireplace ; then paced across the room, whilst Arthur sat humbly on a distant ottoman.

‘Miss Mirabel,’ began the Baronet, ‘my brother tells me that you have made a curious discovery with regard to Mrs. Dasent ; in fact, that her husband did not die as she believed.’

Miss Mirabel bowed her head in assent, and Sir John went on :

‘Now, I don’t for one minute believe that Mrs. Dasent has an idea of this : I am convinced that she was herself duped ; but it is none the less right that the mystery should be cleared up. We have seen a great deal of her here ; we are all very fond of her, as you know,’—Miss Mirabel could hardly repress a smile at this,—‘and our first wish would be to shield her from trouble ; in fact, to help her in every way. But, as I have told my brother, Jack has

asked my consent to his marriage with Mrs. Dasent. Since you have made this discovery, such a proposal necessarily falls to the ground.'

Miss Mirabel's hands trembled so violently that her work nearly fell to the ground also. After all, she had only thwarted herself, and prevented the removal of her own rival. She could hardly follow Sir John when he continued:

'I want to ascertain at once beyond doubt that the man is still alive. I understand you can do this for me. Will you kindly tell me all you know about him?'

Her first impulse was to retreat, but it was too late to plead entire ignorance. She began, therefore, to recount her experiences of Mr. Dodd, much as she had already made them known to Arthur.

'I shall send a telegram at once,' said Sir John. 'You think this Wilkinson

would know. Arthur, are you acquainted with him?’

‘Yes, I think he would remember me,’ said Arthur.

‘Then it shall go in your name. Something like this: “Wire information about Dodd, actor in your company. Is he well, and where living?” This shall go the first thing in the morning; in fact, I’ll send it to the office to-night.’

He rang the bell, and when the servant came he gave orders that the telegram was to be sent off as soon as the office opened in the morning.

‘Really, Miss Mirabel,’ said Sir John, ‘you add to my obligations. Nothing could have been more fortunate, though I am sorry for the lady; very sorry.’

Miss Mirabel saw at once she was on the right side, even if she had done herself a bad turn directly.

‘Of course I am glad to have helped you, Sir John,’ she said. ‘Poor Mrs. Dasent will be distressed, but it would have been dreadful if she had not been found out in time.’

‘That’s not fair,’ exclaimed Arthur from the background; ‘no one has any right to say that Mrs. Dasent is a fraud.’

‘My dear Arthur, no one dreams of saying so,’ said Sir John, ‘least of all Miss Mirabel.’

Miss Mirabel was prepared to say anything spiteful, and meant to make the most of her opportunity.

‘I only meant that she was getting out of her depths. Poor dear! her life has been so unfortunate; she seems destined to be constantly in trouble.’

‘I don’t see that she’s to blame for that,’ said Arthur, doggedly.

‘Except that she might make more cer-

tain of her ground before she takes such a step as getting re-married,' said Miss Mirabel, in a soothing tone, as if she deprecated unseemly wrangling.

'We all make mistakes,' said Sir John ; 'she may be to blame, but not for any deliberate wrong she has done to us. I am concerned about her future. I suppose she won't stay here after this ; but it's not a pleasant prospect to send her packing.'

'She has got her husband now to take care of her,' suggested Miss Mirabel.

'I don't suppose she will want to see much of him, unless he is less black than he is painted ; but naturally she will want to find out about him,' said Sir John.

'Let us do what we can to help her,' Arthur proposed, in a mournful voice.

Sir John would have inclined in a general way to maintain that it was no affair of his, and the lady might do as she

pleased; but after all, he had gone so far as to ask her to marry him, and that made a difference.

‘By all means,’ he said. ‘Of course we will help her—but first I must settle with Jack.’ He took another turn across the room, and went on, anxiously, ‘When a young chap gets his head filled with this sort of whim, he is apt to be troublesome.’

‘I am uncommonly sorry for Jack,’ exclaimed Arthur.

‘Oh, Captain Balstoun, you ought to be only too thankful for his escape,’ cried Miss Mirabel.

‘Arthur, don’t talk arrant nonsense,’ said Sir John, savagely; ‘you are like an hysterical school-girl. The boy is up in the clouds, and it won’t be easy to bring him to reason—don’t make matters worse by backing him up.’

‘He can’t want to marry Mrs. Dasent

now it is known she has a husband,' said Miss Mirabel. 'Very likely he will be cured of his infatuation when he finds out how he has been taken in.'

'He hasn't been taken in,' growled Arthur.

Sir John took no notice of this interruption, and went on :

'He is much more likely to go mad over some crack-brained notion of chivalry. Anyhow, I must see him. I wonder whether he has come in yet.' And he went out of the room.

Miss Mirabel went on with her work, and Arthur sat silent. Presently she began :

'You are not usually rude to women, Captain Balstoun. Why have you suddenly begun with me?'

'Why are you bent on running down Mrs. Dasent? She's never done anything to hurt you. I know Jack will be fearfully

disappointed; I'd give a good bit if your discovery could be unmade.'

Miss Mirabel smiled scornfully.

'I admire your affection for him, and your thoughtfulness for Mrs. Dasent. I am sorry though that they cost me all your good opinion.'

'You know they don't; only I am very sorry, and it pains me to hear you speaking as if you had no pity.'

'Whom should I pity—a man who is saved from a disgraceful marriage? I think both he and Sir John would have been much to pity if it had come about. You too, Captain Balstoun; for I daresay you wouldn't have been quite so sanguine if this had transpired after instead of before. You find fault with me, but I can't say I think I have done wrong.'

'I know you haven't: I didn't mean to be rude.'

‘Don’t apologise to me; you have a perfect right to think what you please. I believe Sir John is satisfied: that is something.’

This adroit touch on Arthur’s jealousy brought him to submission. He disliked the idea of being excluded from any good understanding between her and Sir John. His affections were distracted between two poles which had but little affinity, and he relapsed into a most lugubrious silence.

CHAPTER IX.

JACK IS HIT RIGHT AND LEFT.

WHEN Jack Balstoun left the dining-room, after dinner, he went direct to Mrs. Dasent's house. She had dined, and was sitting in her drawing-room, beneath a large shaded lamp. Her head lay back on the cushion of her chair, and her hands rested on its arms. She sat unmoved, wrapt in thought, care stamped on every line of her face. Her eyes were fixed on the black outline of trees through the open French windows, but she saw nothing. Jack stood outside for some time watching her, and wondering

why she did not see him. Her vision was all introspective.

He came forward presently into the lamplight, and Mrs. Dasent roused herself with a cry.

‘I wouldn’t give a penny for those thoughts,’ said Jack, seating himself at her feet. ‘They did look black.’

She smoothed back the hair from his forehead, and looked into his eyes.

‘They were sad thoughts,’ she said.

‘Won’t you trust me, then?’ demanded Jack.

‘I am not trustful of myself,’ she answered.

‘What are you afraid of?’ he inquired, laughing.

She hesitated a moment and looked away. Then she said—

‘I am afraid I may not be strong enough to keep my resolve.’

Jack raised himself a little, and uttered her name.

‘ Oh, Jack,’ she cried, ‘ don’t make it too hard for me to bear. I will do what is right ; I have vowed I will do it at whatever cost. I ought never to have accepted you. Why did you ever ask me to be your wife ? I thought you never would ; that it would never come to that. It was impossible that you should marry me ; your people would not let you, and I ought not to have listened. Oh, I knew it could never be ; and yet when you asked me I lost my reason : you made me say yes, and all this trouble has come upon us. Let me go, let me go ; never come and see me again. Forget all about me, and marry somebody else that your father will like,’ she rushed on excitedly, in a shrill tone.

Jack took both her hands, and, though

he looked frightened, he set about quieting her without misgiving.

‘My dear, you have been moping here until you have worked your poor nerves to fiddle-strings. Now sit still, and I’ll talk to you. You’ll be all right directly.’

She burst into tears bordering on hysterics, and tore her hands from his grasp.

‘You don’t understand,’ she cried. ‘I give you up, I renounce you, I throw you over. You can call me every bad name you like, but you cannot prevent me. I will never marry you.’

Jack saw that she was excited, and he gave her time to recover. He needed it for himself. It was becoming evident that Mrs. Dasent was not talking at random, and his own energies needed pulling together. Her sobs grew less violent presently, and she let him raise her head.

‘Come, now,’ he said, ‘try to tell me what is the matter.’

She struggled for a few moments ; then, conquering her outburst, she turned a very white face upon him, and answered—

‘When you were here this morning, I said I must go away and leave you. You laughed it off as an impossible threat ; but I meant it. I have thought of it continually, and I am certain it is my duty.’

Jack’s face was grave and his voice faltered.

‘Why is it your duty?’ he demanded.

‘Because it is the right course. Oh, my darling, I have loved you indeed ; but no true woman would accept a husband on such terms as you offer.’

‘What terms?’

‘You know very well : I see more clearly every hour. You are young, you have not seen the world ; in marrying

me you make a sacrifice. Your friends would say so, and I could not bear that.'

'Can we not be independent of other people's opinion?' asked Jack.

'No, we cannot; nobody can. Nobody can disregard the world's opinion, least of all ourselves, for there is justice on their side, Jack. A woman in my position, who marries a man like you, blocks his life at the outset: it would be wicked.'

'That's madness, it's blasphemy,' cried Jack.

'And besides that,' she continued, 'I should be the ruin of your home, for Sir John would never be reconciled to me.'

'I told you this morning,' said Jack, 'that if you were to go away you would widen the breach. I would never forgive my father.'

'In time you would recover; oh, yes, I know very well you would. You don't

believe that now, but it is always so.'

'And what is to become of you?'

'I shall leave this place and go to London, and be lost in the crowd. I mean to see Sir John and tell him so.'

She had fallen into her ordinary tone; her voice was low, and she had got the better of her excitement. Jack, who at first had set himself the simple task of quieting her morbid misgivings, realised that he had to fight with a substance, not a shadow.

'Connie,' he exclaimed, 'no one but a good woman would dream of acting as you do. You are generous, but your generosity cuts both ways. You think you may take this line from a sense of justice. But you forget me. You have given me your word; I have a right to bind you to it.'

'You cannot prevent me from breaking it.'

‘You would not do that.’

‘There is nothing I would not do. I have counted the cost. I think I have reached the depths of misery.’

‘You are blinding yourself: your duty does not lie away from me.’

‘It is no use, Jack. I have fought it out already, and I have won.’

‘What is your victory worth?’

‘The satisfaction of feeling I have behaved well to you.’

‘Well to me! you are describing an act of perfidy.’

‘I am prepared for reproaches; say them, Jack: say the worst you can find.’

‘If you do this, Connie, you will deserve them. It will be the most monstrous deed ever done by woman.’

She shook her head sadly.

‘If you believe this,’ he went on, ‘why did you not say so at once? Why did

you accept me at first? It would have been better to take this moral line at once.'

'That was my fault. It's no good regretting; but it was my first weakness that caused the mischief. I was taken by surprise; I let myself be persuaded. Jack, you should never have asked me.'

'If this is your idea of how to treat a man who loves you, then you're right: I ought not to have asked you.'

'Jack, can't you make excuses; it's for your sake. Won't you forgive me?'

'You play fast and loose with me: you desert me at the first sign of trouble.'

'No; it isn't that, dear. But I can't blame you. According to accepted ideas, I am behaving disgracefully.'

He broke out afresh.

'Connie, you shan't, you mustn't; you'll spoil my life, you'll kill me. Don't you see how I love you?'

She smiled wearily.

‘I don’t doubt that: but it won’t kill you.’

‘Haven’t you any pity for me?’

‘None. I am as hard as stone.’

Jack sprang to his feet.

‘I believe you are,’ he exclaimed.

‘Your sense of duty is very fine, but I don’t envy you. You have deceived me; you are all head and no heart: and I thought you quite perfect.’

His voice broke in a sob as he turned angrily away.

‘You had better go home,’ she said, ‘before you say things that you will be sorry for to-morrow.’

‘There is nothing left to be sorry for when one has once been treated like this,’ cried the young philosopher. ‘You have shown me that a man should have no such thing as faith.’

‘ Good-night, dear Jack,’ she said, sadly. ‘ I don’t reproach you for anything you have said : remember that. I accept the entire blame from first to last.’

He stood by the open window looking down upon her, stung with disappointment. It was a cruel strain for the young mind, but with a great effort he kept some measure of self-control.

‘ I won’t take this as final,’ he said. ‘ It’s too bad to be true. Some day we’ll laugh at it, and call it a nightmare. As it is, I will go.’

He went up to her and took her hand. He stood a moment looking earnestly at her averted face : then he simply kissed her fingers, and seizing his hat left her without another word.

It had been a stern ordeal for Mrs. Dasent ; but she had kept to her purpose. Now that the tension was relaxed, she

gave way, and sat a long time crying helplessly until from sheer exhaustion she fell asleep in her chair.

Jack walked home in a tumult; his pulses throbbed violently. The disappointment had been so sudden and sharp that it had robbed him of judgment. It was anger that he had felt more than anything else: he was young, and he smarted with school-boy indignation under a sense of injustice. He hurried along reeling off imaginary tirades; vowing endless resolves to stick to his guns, and confusing this determination with anger against Constance Dasent.

The former feeling was the stronger, and by degrees wrath gave way to grief. Life, with her figure eliminated, presented a hopeless prospect now. It was almost physical pain to think of it. The conviction gained on him, until his heart grew

soft. He repented his hard words: he felt he had been unjust, and a bully. He was inclined to run back and beg pardon: but he wavered; and then the hot tears came into his eyes, and he gave way to overwhelming distress. He flung himself on a garden seat, and had his hour of anguish with an appropriate audience of moon and stars.

A footfall on the gravel roused him, and turning towards the unwelcome intruder, he beheld his uncle.

‘Hullo, Jack,’ exclaimed the Captain, ‘you are sitting alone.’

It was not a brilliant observation; he was not good at improvising remarks. In the literal sense it was true; but a spectre such as Jack was confronting becomes a reality. His grief had conjured up a ‘blue devil’ with whom he had to wrestle. He

would have come off better with a few flesh wounds in a conflict with an armed brigand than with the deadly heart-sickness that this contest had brought on him. There are two common laughing-stocks on earth, the extreme poles of sentiment: namely, the sea-sick man and the love-sick. The former, for some unknown reason, is an object of derision instead of pity. It does not matter: his pangs, though infernal, are temporary, and he recovers quickly. The latter undergoes a laceration of the chords which admittedly awake the keenest human feeling. A great love is the fulfilment of a great soul: yet it is generally considered a ridiculous affectation in young men. A youth who emerges from a battle worsted, bleeding, and mangled, is a hero; a youth whose goal has consisted in the perfecting

of his own life instead of destroying that of other people, receives, in case of similar ill-usage, unlimited mockery.

Jack belonged to the latter category, and Arthur Balstoun would of course have been justified in using the time-honoured epithets appropriate to young men in love. But Arthur was not like other men in many ways ; amongst other things he suffered from profound affection—so much so that it often warped his judgment. For instance, here was his nephew bent upon making a fool of himself ; here was Sir John at his wits' ends how to prevent him : Arthur himself arrives in the nick of time with a solution of the difficulty, and, instead of being proud, he is actually as much distressed as a romantic young lady. Of course he did not know the cause of Jack's grief, but he imagined his brother's conduct would account for that. Further-

more, he knew very well the blow that was impending, and he felt wonderfully anxious to offer some kind of consolation.

‘I am afraid you are rather down on your luck, Jack,’ he began.

‘Never mind,’ answered Jack, vaguely. ‘This is a poor world anyhow. One must get on as best one can.’

‘Don’t talk like that, old man. You mustn’t be downhearted. Of course one doesn’t always get one’s way ; but for you life ought to be very happy.’

‘Of course it ought ; and it might be. My goodness, how we do smash up the happiness that comes within reach. We don’t deserve decent luck, any of us.’

‘My dear Jack, it can’t be as bad as that.’

‘Uncle Arthur, my life is hell,’ Jack broke out ; ‘has father told you what’s happened?’

Arthur fidgeted a little before saying—

‘ Yes.’

‘ Then hear my version. I got engaged to the greatest angel in the world ; no two people ever understood each other better, or could have been more happy. My life would have been perfect ; I should have lived amongst my neighbours, and tried to be a real country gentleman. Instead of this, my father’s pride comes in and makes all sorts of objections. Of course he was nettled by her misunderstanding him, but I don’t think he made an obstacle of that. It’s his pride that’s ruined me. The result is, she now says it would be doing me an injury to marry me, and she declares she won’t. And I couldn’t convince her, and like a brute I bullied her, and—and I’m the most miserable devil unhung.’

And the young man buried his face in his hands.

Arthur Balstoun's blue eyes were sad : he patted his nephew's shoulder for a minute in silence.

‘It's good of you, Jack, to credit your father with the right motive. I'm glad you don't accuse him of jealousy : and, of course, you see that from the ordinary point of view he has reason. People would say that.’ Arthur was conscientious, and did a little whitewashing of Sir John before reverting to Jack's feelings. ‘At the same time, Jack, I am sorry for you : I can't tell you how sorry I am to find you like this. But I've got to tell you something you don't know. John would tell you, anyhow, but I may as well say it at once, though it's bad telling. It will be bad news to you, though it seems good to your father. The fact is, Mrs. Dasent's husband is still alive.’

Jack raised his head and stared at him.

‘Her husband is still alive ! Then we can’t be married.’

He said it quite calmly, but without meaning, like a man talking in his sleep.

Arthur went on :

‘He was alive quite lately in Australia. I saw him there : I found out by accident that he was Mrs. Dasent’s husband, and told John.’

‘You told him ?’ repeated Jack.

‘For his own sake, Jack : I knew he was making a good deal of her’ : (he made no allusion to Miss Mirabel) : ‘of course I had no notion about you.’

‘Her husband is alive,’ said Jack again, ‘and you told my father.’

‘She knew nothing of it,’ said Arthur, quickly, ‘don’t imagine that. She is perfectly innocent. I am sorry enough to bring any trouble on you, but, of course, as it is, the discovery is fortunate.’

He had said it, and he looked for the result. But there was none: Jack sat unmoved. If the news had come in the morning, whilst he was full of confidence, it would probably have produced an outburst of rage. As it was, the force had been broken by the late scene in Mrs. Dasent's house. This addition seemed to have a stunning effect. It drove home with a final impetus the conviction that Constance Dasent had really gone out of his reach; and, as often happens in an ultimate stage of trouble, the difficulties of a few minutes ago now took the form of trifles by comparison. It seemed that when he came on to the terrace the game was not really lost: now he was absolutely checkmated. He had no more fight left in him.

Arthur Balstoun grew uneasy: Jack's apathy was worse than any explosion.

‘Come along,’ he said, ‘let’s go indoors. You had better go to bed.’ Jack made no sign of moving, and his uncle was obliged to make him rise. ‘Better sleep on it, Jack: things look less black in the morning.’

Jack’s answer was doleful.

‘There’s only one good thing can happen to me now. That’s to die.’

Arthur pressed his arm soothingly.

‘It will be all right some day,’ he said, and led him towards the house. On the threshold he paused. ‘Jack, you don’t bear me any grudge, do you? I acted for the best, old man.’

Jack showed the first sign of animation. He put his hand into his uncle’s.

‘Dear old Arthur,’ was all he said.

CHAPTER X.

MISS MIRABEL SLIPS, AND ARTHUR
CATCHES HER.

THERE was little rest that night for any of the inmates of Balstoun Castle. Sir John was the only one comparatively happy, and he was worried with the prospect of the interviews due to-morrow. Jack was in despair; Arthur was full of remorse; and Miss Mirabel was beside herself with vexation. If she had only left matters alone Jack would have married Mrs. Dasent, and her own course would have been clear. Of course the Baronet had

taken a hostile attitude towards his son's proposal, but the latter would probably have had his own way in the end. True, no marriage between Sir John and Mrs. Dasent was possible at present, but Mr. Dasent might die, and then, whilst the widow remained unmarried, there would always be danger from Miss Mirabel's point of view. She stamped about her room; tore to shreds a bunch of violets she had worn at dinner; even hurt herself physically to give vent to her anger. Finally she began considering the possibility of picking up the pieces and mending her own case. She pondered deep into the night, heedless of pale looks and other symptoms which might ensue. She was playing a desperate game and had no time to consider trifles. After a great deal of thought she rose and fetched from a drawer an alarum. This she set with great care;

then went to bed and slept comfortably until its ringing roused her.

Arthur Balstoun had gone to bed like a sensible man ; but he had passed a wretched night. Jack's grief affected him painfully. The more he thought of it the better he persuaded himself that such a marriage as his nephew desired would be a tolerably good affair. He thought of all the men who had married young and lived happily ; of all the nice women he knew who boasted no ancestry. Then he counted up the cases of people who had made big marriages and led dogs' lives ever afterwards. After all, conformity to social type did not bring such unfailing advantages that its violation must mean perdition.

There are corners of this earth where people dwell in gladness, unnoticed and apart. They make of God's universe a law unto themselves, and heed not the amend-

ments inserted there by man. Why should not Jack take this line if he chose? For aught one could tell, he would grow up happier, and certainly not less useful, than other people. It would be a good experiment, and might result in the revival of patriarchal relations unknown in these days of absenteeism.

Arthur pondered this before he slept, and he resumed the train of thought when he woke early. It was in the stillness of dawning day; he drew up the blind and sat at the open window, drawing fancy pictures of Jack's life, supposing he married Mrs. Dasent and settled down here to live. He began to confound Dasent, alias Dodd, for being still alive. Then he wondered what the probability was of his being still forthcoming. He was evidently an erratic creature; he had very likely wandered out of his former ken. It would be

a horrible nuisance if the answer came that nothing was known of him. So strongly did Arthur feel this that he made up his mind to go down to the post-office and supplement the telegram. He dressed himself and left the house as quietly as possible. The morning was well advanced by this time and was exquisitely fair. It seemed quite wrong that strife should be raging in the midst of such tranquillity. It was tiresome that people could not either have their own way in everything, or else be contented without it.

The village post-office consisted of a corner of the general emporium. There was not much to buy there, and custom was limited ; but whereas it was free from competition and derived some expansion of custom by its dealings in stamps and telegrams, the concern was by no means bad.

Arthur found the postmaster's son taking down the shutters.

‘ Good-morning, Tom,’ said the Captain
‘ Is the office open yet ?’

‘ Why, not by rights, Captain ; but anything you wants, of course shall be done. I’m getting ready now.’

‘ There was a telegram sent down from the Castle last night,’ said Arthur. ‘ I want to add something to it. Can you give it me ?’

‘ Someone has just been to mother about it, I think, sir. Mother!’ he cried, turning into the house. ‘ What’s that about the telegram as came in last night ? The Captain wants it altered.’

He went indoors, leaving Arthur to settle what addition he was going to make. He wished to explain that if Wilkinson, the manager, knew nothing of Dodd at present, he was to spare no pains in prose-

cuting enquiries. Whilst he was turning over in his mind how he could best express this in a few words, Tom came out with a telegraph form in his hands.

‘Mother was just sending it off,’ he said. ‘Miss Mirabel was here five minutes ago, and said Sir John wanted this message sent instead of the other.’

Arthur took the paper in great surprise, and read as follows :

‘Wire from Wilkinson to Balstoun, Balstoun Castle, announcement of your death last month. Am writing.—Mirabel.’

It was addressed to Dodd.

Arthur Balstoun had misgivings as to his sanity. What in the world could this mean? Miss Mirabel had discovered the identity of Dodd: she had made great use of her information; and now she was about to nullify it in a manner which on

the face of it was wholly unwarrantable.

‘How long ago was Miss Mirabel here?’ he asked.

‘Not many minutes, sir. She turned up the lane yonder: she ought to be in sight, if you was to go there quick.’

Arthur Balstoun said nothing, but bidding them delay the message, he went quickly in this direction. He turned up a lane, past the back of a cottage and out into a meadow. A hundred yards in front, walking very slowly, he saw Miss Mirabel. She had an air of pre-occupation, and Arthur easily approached her unobserved.

‘Good-morning,’ he said, in a low voice, standing close behind her.

Miss Mirabel turned with a cry, pulling her veil over her face: he had startled her with a vengeance. For a moment or two they confronted one another in silence: for once Miss Mirabel was at a disadvan-

tage ; she was caught out. Arthur eyed his deity in dismay : he had never yet felt any cooling in his admiration, but somehow at this moment he was inclined to be ashamed of her. Ever since the day when Michal the daughter of Saul despised David in her heart for leaping before the Ark of the Covenant, men and women have been subject to violent revulsions respecting anyone who appears either ridiculous or undignified.

It is not so with friendship : friends are only pained and drawn closer by one another's failures and follies. But love is an abnormal state of mind, apt to be hysterical ; and anything jarring may smash up the artificial fabric which intense fervour has created. Arthur had long entertained an unreasoning idolatry for Miss Mirabel : he had never had occasion to palliate a short-coming, or shut his eyes

to a fault. For the first time he detected signs of weakness, and he felt a chill trickling through him.

‘How you startled me, Captain Balstoun!’ said the lady, presently, without unveiling her face. ‘I didn’t hear you coming. Why have you followed me here?’ She uttered the last words with returning assurance.

Arthur could think of nothing to say, and made a sheep-like answer.

‘I heard you had come this way.’

‘It is curious you should be about so early; why did you come after me?’

‘They told me at the telegraph office,’ said Arthur.

Miss Mirabel flinched; her veil hid her face.

‘Oh, yes, they saw me passing,’ she said.

‘They told me you had been there about the telegram,’ blurted out Arthur.

Miss Mirabel hesitated a moment ; then she caught Arthur by the arm and burst into tears.

‘I couldn’t help it,’ she cried, ‘I was so wretched. I saw what mischief I had done ; I had destroyed your nephew’s happiness, and I had only meant to do my duty. I couldn’t endure the thought of his grief, and I felt sure that if it were ascertained that Dodd was dead, Mr. Jack would have his own way in the end. Don’t be angry with me ; perhaps I ought not to have done anything without telling you first, because you are so good to me ; but I meant no harm, indeed I didn’t.’

Arthur was not entirely reassured. The ingenious allusion to his influence over her conduct sounded pleasantly, but Miss Mirabel had done a thing which displeased

even him. His brother's name had been taken in vain ; beyond that, a grave risk had been incurred.

‘I don't think you had any right to run counter to my brother,’ he said. ‘You must see that what you are doing would thwart him.’

‘But Mr. Jack : think of him. It is so sad to think of his disappointment ; and then dear Mrs. Dasent : it is so hard on her.’

‘That is all very well,’ said Arthur. ‘But, in the first place, you didn't seem to pity her when it was Sir John you thought she wanted to marry ; in the second place, you don't seem to see that you are risking bigamy. Why, last night you ridiculed the idea of my being sorry for Jack, for this very reason. Good heavens, Alice, don't you see what would happen supposing they married whilst Dodd lives.

Supposing he turns up and claims Jack's wife.'

'He won't do that, never fear.'

'How do you know?' asked Arthur, sharply.

Miss Mirabel laughed.

'He wouldn't take the trouble,' she said.

They had walked back towards the village, and Arthur was bending over the gate at the lane end—it had a stiff latch. Miss Mirabel took advantage of his occupation to lift her veil and breathe some air. Her face was white, and her mouth was tightly closed in menace: her fingers were interlaced. Suddenly she made an uncontrollable gesture behind his back, and if she had been possessed of a dagger, it is little short of certain that the life of Arthur Balstoun and the course of this story would at that moment have

been abruptly ended in the one case, and entirely altered in the other. An animal instinct this: the best trained performer in a menagerie, however docile, gets savage under a sense of failure. Nobody is in a safe mood in the hour of defeat. Miss Mirabel had made a slip: she was trapped: even Arthur was driving her into a corner, and up to the surface leapt the lurking fury. She was a bold schemer, and seldom had to confront defeat; her instinct was to turn and rend her oppressor. But when Arthur confronted her again, the face was veiled, and the head meekly bent. She passed by him into the lane.

‘ Dear Captain Balstoun, I see how wrong I have been. It was impulse: it was my anxiety to keep my kind friends from trouble. Surely you will make excuses for me. I was too hasty, and I might have done great harm: but you

have prevented it, dear friend ; you will forgive me, will you not ?' This she said in those penetrating tones which had fascinated Arthur of old. He wavered. ' Let us go to the post-office,' she went on, ' and you can set it right.'

Arthur had nothing to say, and they proceeded in silence. Arrived once more at the post-office, Captain Balstoun went in and sent off an authorised version of the disputed telegram, making such explanation to the post-master as his pre-occupation permitted. Miss Mirabel waited outside, devouring her heart in anger.

It is usually held that we hate those most deeply who have done us the highest services. One cannot deny that it is ever so with weak humanity ; but those there are most assuredly, and not a few of them, who are freely endued with gratitude. Except them from the rule on the one hand,

and on the other, such as hate rather those who thwart them, and this piece of popular cynicism gets a little shaky.

Miss Mirabel violated the rule, for no amount of benefits conferred could have aroused within her a fiercer hatred than she entertained towards the man who had intercepted her plans. It became a struggle to choke down her passion and appear contrite and humble as they walked home. It maddened her to feel that he had a hold over her: on his part he found the position awkward, and wondered how he ought to act. He wished, at any rate, to explain that he would not take advantage of his discovery. He wanted to have an understanding, and did not know how to arrive at it. Miss Mirabel solved the difficulty: she saw no help for it.

‘ You will think me foolish,’ she said, with a nervous laugh, ‘ but I want you to

promise to keep my secret. I don't want anyone but you to know how rash I have been.'

Arthur hesitated a moment.

'You must promise me something in return.'

Miss Mirabel put the worst construction on his words.

'Captain Balstoun, you surely don't mean to take such an advantage of me?'

'Good Lord, no!' exclaimed he, promptly. 'I am not that sort of fellow. What made you think it? I only mean that you mustn't do this sort of thing again. Things must run their course now.'

They had arrived at the Castle, and Miss Mirabel, murmuring an assent, hurried away, leaving Arthur to retire to his room in dire perplexity of mind.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. DASENT HEARS OF HER HUSBAND.

SIR JOHN BALSTOUN was in capital spirits as he dressed himself this morning. He might feel a little uncomfortable at the idea of a scene, that was natural; but the satisfaction of knowing that he held the winning card outweighed all other thoughts. He was standing in front of a looking-glass brushing his beard and studying his features in the full morning light. A knock at the door disturbed him. He ceased humming a tune, and cried, 'Come in;' whereupon his servant entered, bringing him a letter.

Sir John began to hum again when he looked at the address, for the sight of Mrs. Dasent's writing excited him, and he was anxious to disguise the fact. He had intended paying her a visit, and here was the lady, as he learnt upon perusal, requesting an opportunity of calling on him. She named an early hour, and hoped she would find Sir John disengaged. This suited the Baronet very well. He did not know what she wanted, and did not much care; he was bound to get the best of her. He must have his word with Jack first, that was all; and the sooner the better. He went down to breakfast, and found Miss Mirabel and his brother *tête-à-tête*. The lady sat behind the great urn, looking very fresh and cheerful—the sort of figure a man likes to see at his breakfast-table. It kept up Sir John's good-humour to see her.

‘ Good-morning, Miss Mirabel ; a lovely day again.’ he said. ‘ Well, Arthur, how did you sleep ? None the worse for your exciting discovery ?’

It occurred to Arthur that the discovery of which Sir John spoke was not his own, albeit he had made a later discovery which had disturbed him a good deal. He felt uncomfortable, but Miss Mirabel remained so entirely serene that he gained a little composure, and made some sort of reply.

‘ Where’s our young friend ?’ went on the Baronet from the sideboard. ‘ Has he had breakfast ?’

‘ Not here, Sir John,’ said Miss Mirabel.

‘ I wonder where he is,’ said the father.

‘ I have my bone to pick with him.’

‘ Not a pleasant task, I am afraid,’ said Miss Mirabel.

‘ Oh, I don’t know. It’s very evident it’s got to be done, and it’s no use making

a fuss. I have been accustomed all my life to go to the point and stick to it. I shan't have much trouble.'

Then Arthur spoke.

'I don't think you need have any. I have told Jack.'

'The deuce you have! When?'

'Last night. I found him on the terrace when I was coming in, and we had a talk.'

Miss Mirabel pricked up her ears, but wisely left the questioning to Sir John.

'You are a capital fellow, Arthur,' he said. 'You've saved me from a great deal of bother. How did he like it?'

'About as much as any man likes to hear the worst news one can give him.'

Sir John laughed.

'You are as bad as he is. Poor Jack! I am really very sorry for him.'

'You might have been if you had seen

him last night,' protested Arthur ; but Sir John only laughed again as he took his plate away.

'If you had a talk with him,' he said, 'perhaps you can tell me why she wants to see me. I hear she means to come this morning.'

'Yes, I can,' said Arthur, 'because Jack told me. When Mrs. Dasent found how much you opposed their engagement, and realised what a bad marriage for Jack it would be considered, she made up her mind to leave him. She throws him over, in fact, because she thinks it is for his advantage. I found him in trouble about that, so I gave him the news to try and console him.'

'An odd consolation,' said Sir John. 'It sounds to me more like tapping him on the head to put him out of his misery. But did she really mean it, I wonder.'

‘I’ve no doubt she meant it,’ said Arthur, stoutly.

‘She’s a good woman,’ said Sir John, with a burst of admiration. ‘I knew she was one of the right sort, but I didn’t know she was as determined as that.’

He was silent : this information had impressed him forcibly ; and Miss Mirabel’s hatred went out towards the ill-starred lady in proportion to the favour which her conduct had awakened.

‘She’s a brave lady,’ said Sir John again. ‘The boy may almost be forgiven in the case of such a woman. She’s coming to tell me she won’t marry my son. I almost wish she could have the satisfaction of making me look small ; instead of which I must tell her she couldn’t marry him if she wanted to. Upon my word that’s hard lines.’

Sir John felt that, as his son had become

acquainted with their news, it was unnecessary to send for him ; especially as he had shown an inclination to remain in private. Therefore he had nothing to do after breakfast but retire to his room and await Mrs. Dasent's visit. He felt genuinely sorry : to inflict pain on one who deserved well of him was uncongenial to his temper, especially upon one towards whom he had entertained warm feelings. They had been extinguished, he would have declared, by recent events ; but they were assuredly latent within him. He was much concerned. However, there was no doubt where his duty lay, and consequently no doubt whither his conduct would lead him.

Miss Mirabel was full of fidgets. Even in the hour of triumph she was jealous of Mrs. Dasent. The idea of a secret interview in which her rival (as she deemed her) would enjoy the Baronet's soothing

attentions was repugnant to her, and she relieved her mind by going downstairs and finding fault with every single domestic arrangement. She could not bear the sight of Arthur this morning, and kept out of his way. She tried going to her own room and singing for distraction ; but, like a moth at a candle, she must needs get back to the region of the library. At the sound of the bell which announced Mrs. Dasent's arrival, her heart beat vehemently, and she inwardly anathematised the footman for his delay in opening the door. She heard footsteps in the hall ; and emerging, wreathed in smiles, she gave Mrs. Dasent 'good-morning.' The widow was closely veiled, and responded drily.

'I am going to see Sir John,' she said ;
'I think he is in.'

'I don't know,' answered Miss Mirabel, naïvely. 'I thought I saw him go out.'

The footman meekly reassured them, and Mrs. Dasent passed on. Miss Mirabel reflected with much chagrin that only by placing her ear to the keyhole could she hope to hear one word of that which passed in the library, and the position of the door was unluckily too public to permit of such tactics. She was reduced therefore to remaining on guard to assure herself of the duration of the interview, and of the visible effects to be found on Mrs. Dasent's face at its termination.

Sir John received his visitor with composure: there was nothing on his side to betoken an awkward situation. He took her hand and led her to a chair: his smile was not forced nor his voice constrained.

‘Why did not you let me come to you?’ he said. ‘You might have spared yourself a walk.’

‘I thought it better to come here,’ she said, simply.

‘I am very glad you came, my dear lady. Of course we have had a little trouble: but I hope that hasn’t destroyed all good feeling between us. You may rely on my devotion if you ever need it.’

This was an unexpected change of tone, and almost disconcerted Mrs. Dasent. She had screwed up her spirits to fighting point, and behold here was peace.

‘Thank you, Sir John. I have not come to ask for any favour,’ she said, in a low voice.

He sat close to her, and put out his hand soothingly.

‘Come, you are not going to be irreconcilable?’ he said. ‘I feel sure that you appreciate the spirit in which I have acted.’

Mrs. Dasent sprang to her feet. All

the passion that was in her flamed up.

‘ Sir John, I have not come to plead to you or ask you to pity me. I have come to say that I will not marry your son : I have told him so. He is full of honour ; the desertion is on my part. I don’t do it to please you : I don’t do it to please myself ; it is only for his sake. You know I was misled ; I deceived myself. Now I know ! It is not you that have kept me out of your family, it is I that entirely refuse to enter it.’

She fronted him with a grand air, and Sir John for a moment felt a stab at the notion of losing such a woman out of his ken. He rose, and made a gesture of acquiescence.

‘ Please say no more, Mrs. Dasent. I should have saved you the pain of saying so much, for I have learnt what passed between you and my son yesterday. For-

give me, though, if I say that I should have regretted not hearing this from your lips. You are aware of my regard for you: you have, if possible, increased my respect.'

He spoke with calm dignity of a pompous kind, and Mrs. Dasent with fierce beating heart watched him narrowly.

'I am glad, Sir John, you no longer think as you thought some time ago. Your language then implied no regard and little respect.'

'Mrs. Dasent,' said Sir John, raising his hand, 'you must exercise all your generosity and forgive me. Recollect the extraordinary misconception under which I laboured: allow for my annoyance, and then make what excuses you can for my temper. I regret what happened: indeed, I remember it with shame. I ask your pardon.'

‘There is no need for that,’ said Mrs. Dasent, bitterly, leaning against the mantelpiece. ‘In this affair we have both acted wrongly. Only Jack is free from blame; only he deserves apology. It is his unhappiness that troubles me.’

And she hid her face behind her ungloved hand. Sir John gently persuaded her to sit down again.

‘It would not be gallant of me to say that he will easily recover. I won’t suggest that: nor need I, for I have something else to tell you. You must calm yourself, my dear lady: you must prepare for startling news. I don’t fear telling you, for I am sure of your courage.’ He had had some iced water put into the room, and he now went across and poured out a glass, which he brought back to her. This gave Mrs. Dasent time to collect herself. Sir John had his task by heart. The

ice sparkled and clinked against the glass as he put it at her side. 'Now,' he went on, 'you must understand that in any case your marriage with Jack would be impossible. Little as you imagine it, you are not, I must tell you, in a position to marry anybody.'

'Why not, Sir John? What have I done?'

'Nothing whatever: except that you married some time ago.'

'Why should that prevent me, as long as I am a widow?'

'Precisely; but suppose you are not a widow? Suppose it turned out that, after all, your husband——'

She interrupted him. She gave a cry and started forward into the room. For a few moments she stood with her back to the light, so that he could not read her face. Then she came towards him, with her hand outstretched.

‘It is not true,’ she whispered. ‘You only say that to get rid of me.’

Sir John was startled in his turn. People seldom charged him with falsehood.

‘Does it not occur to you,’ he said, proudly, ‘that, after the handsome way in which you have acted, deceit on my part is unnecessary?’

‘It can’t be true; it can’t,’ she said, in wailing tones. ‘He died long ago; I have all the proofs.’

‘You mustn’t mind if I seem brutal, but it appears to me that the motive which made your husband leave you as he did might make him anxious to disappear completely. He probably did not wish to be looked for.’

‘But what had he to gain by it?’

Sir John drummed on the table.

‘That is at the bottom of the mystery,’ he said.

‘How did you find out?’ inquired Mrs. Dasent, sharply. Astonishment had so far exceeded curiosity in her mind.

This was the part of the interview Sir John found least agreeable. There had been a taint of spying on the course of events, and, valuable as the result had been, it was not entirely clean in his eyes.

‘Curiously enough,’ he said, ‘my brother knew your husband in Australia.’

‘Why did he not tell me so at once?’

‘He has only just learnt that it was your husband whom he knew,’ said Sir John.

‘How did he learn that?’

‘It appears,’ answered Sir John, ‘that you showed a portrait of Mr. Dasent to Miss Mirabel. She identified it with a photograph in her possession of a man named Dodd with whom she had been acquainted in the colonies. The discovery

was most important, and with excellent discretion she consulted my brother, who, as I say, knew him also.'

'It was Miss Mirabel, then?' said Mrs. Dasent, fiercely.

'Her position was delicate, and she showed every consideration for your feelings. I think you will allow that.'

'She hates me, and she stabbed me in the back instead of confronting me. That is what I think of Miss Mirabel, Sir John.'

'My dear Mrs. Dasent, you do her great injustice. Miss Mirabel has acted in entire singleness of purpose.'

'I don't doubt it,' said Mrs. Dasent, ironically.

Sir John continued,

'We have sent a telegram to Australia with a view to learning your husband's present address. I will let you hear directly we receive a reply.'

Mrs. Dasent said nothing. She was holding the mantelpiece with both hands ; the ground was beginning to sway under her, and the room was as full of noises as a railway tunnel with an express train in it. Sir John observed this, and went up to her : but she waved him off with one hand, and with an effort steadied herself.

‘ It is all so sudden, Sir John, I can’t realise it yet.’ Then she asked, in a low voice, ‘ Have you told Jack ?’

Sir John said yes, and there was a pause.

‘ I think I had better see Miss Mirabel at once,’ she went on. ‘ Will you ask her to come ; and please don’t leave us.’

Sir John was puzzled. It sounded as if Mrs. Dasent feared an attack from Miss Mirabel, though in truth her own feelings appeared to be vindictive enough. He went at once, and Mrs. Dasent was left to

her reflections. It had been a staggering shock. Her life during these past years had presented a lively little comedy. Unwatched by any large audience, it had been exciting for the heroine. Her interrupted marriage, her lonely migration, the growth of new associations, had led her to what promised to be a haven of happiness : and behold, upon its threshold, the past was unburying itself to stop her.

An early love is not easily forgotten. At the end of many stirring years it lingers still, a tender spot upon one's memory. The fading, or the disillusioning, or the baseness, whatever may have been its undoing, are apt to be forgotten ; its fervour and freshness are there, and very little fanning serves to rekindle the flame. Herbert Dasent had been her first lover : he had once filled her life. No woman of spirit could suffer such treatment as she

had undergone without indignation, and Constance Dasent was not one to submit impassively to whatever antics a man might choose to play. She was capable of bringing the delinquent to book had she known where to find him, and short had been his shrift had no valid excuse been forthcoming. But she had clung to a hope that her husband had been a victim to such a fatality as does sometimes entangle the skein of a man's life ; that he had even been like the hero of a melodrama, who is doomed to be everlastingly misunderstood. In fact, she had started with a sneaking inclination to exonerate him, which his death had helped to strengthen. His personality remained a two-sided picture, but the bright side had generally been uppermost. In a moment the situation had been recast: the dim figure of Herbert Dasent flashed back into life with the perplexing problem

of his conduct unsolved ; the interval became a dream, the new associations a mockery. The news was positively convulsing : her emotion grew unbearable, and she could not restrain herself when the door opened, and Miss Mirabel entered, followed by Sir John.

‘ Tell me about him ; where did you see him last ? What was he doing ? ’

Miss Mirabel was relieved ; she had counted on an outburst of rage, and found instead only curiosity.

‘ Your husband is, or was, an actor in Melbourne. ’

Sir John was alarmed at Mrs. Dasent’s emotion ; he hated scenes. He would have liked to calm her, and could only think of assuring her that the gentleman was a good actor. He reflected that Arthur would probably have done so ; and the notion amused, and therefore relieved him.

‘ Since when had he been there ? ’

‘ I don’t know ; a long time, apparently. ’

‘ Was he married ? ’ She asked it firmly.

‘ He never gave one to understand so. ’

‘ Did you know him well ? ’

‘ Oh, yes ; we met often. ’

‘ Then tell me about him. Can’t you understand what I want to know ? You bring my husband back from the dead : you say you know him well, and you only tell me that he has been an actor for some time. ’

Miss Mirabel thought a moment ; then she said,

‘ Really, Mrs. Dasent, it is not so easy as you seem to think. I knew him well, but he never told me his story ; there are many of us who don’t care to talk much about the past. I knew him well enough, for instance, to have his photograph ; that is how I recognised him in the portrait

you showed me. If you had not brought him back to my mind, I daresay I should never have given him another thought. I only say what I know : that he has been in Australia since he left you.'

Mrs. Dasent turned to Sir John.

'What did you say in your telegram?' she asked.

Sir John told her, and repeated his promise to let her have the reply as soon as it came.

She enquired whether Captain Balstoun was likely to be better informed, but Miss Mirabel hastened to dispel the idea, averring that he had seen Dodd but once, and then only in passing. She put a string of questions, trying to elicit information as to his character, position, mode of living, and so on ; but Miss Mirabel either could not or would not enlighten her, and she reluctantly prepared to go.

‘Why did you not tell me at once, Miss Mirabel, in my own house, as soon as you found out?’ she enquired at last.

Miss Mirabel wore her most winning air as she murmured,

‘I was so grieved, dear Mrs. Dasent, I could not bear to break it to you.’

‘Why should you be grieved?’ asked Mrs. Dasent, pausing as she stooped for her parasol. ‘What made you think I should regret finding my husband?’

Miss Mirabel winced. She had no reason; she had made Arthur give the plea that Mrs. Dasent’s right position should be known, nothing of her engagement to Jack being then understood. She felt that Sir John was waiting for her answer, and she made a gallant rally. Her wit saved her.

‘It was the fact of his having deceived you, dear Mrs. Dasent,’ she said, and the danger disappeared. ‘Of course he was

driven to it for some very good reason ; no doubt he would be able to justify it—'

Mrs. Dasent cut her short by saying good-bye to Sir John, and passing with a cool bow towards the door.

Sir John displayed all his courtesy in attending her, and Miss Mirabel was left to review the situation by herself.

CHAPTER XII.

JACK CHOOSES ODD CONSOLATION.

JACK had left the Castle early, and had spent the greater part of the morning in a remote portion of the gardens. At some distance from the house there stood within an enclosure of yew-trees a Gothic cross, erected by Sir John's grandfather to the memory of his sister. A singular devotion had existed between them, and the old gentleman had consoled himself by consecrating to her memory a corner of the ground familiar to their companionship. He had cleared a space of trees, planted

the yews, designed a cross in the early English style, and had had engraved upon its base this simple couplet :

‘To thy fond memory, not my grief, this stone is graven :
I leave thy record here ; thee I shall find in heaven.’

Sitting upon the base of this touching symbol of a man’s affection, Jack commanded a view of the lands that would one day be his own. Perhaps one needs to be a hard-working townsman, or a traveller fresh returned from strange lands, to drink in with entire relish the exhilaration of a British landscape : the waving meadows, the ranging hedgerows, the shady copses, the amplitude of life on earth and in the sky ; all these send a throb of joy through a true Englishman’s veins if he can look around him with *mens sana in corpore sano*.

No sound-hearted man can weary of it ; no man jaded or homesick can find a more

delicious restorative: happiest of all should be he who regards it with the consciousness of possession. Yet Jack Balstoun sits here this morning, chin on hand and grief in his eyes, the embodiment of despair: utter irremediable despair, so he thinks. His cup of happiness had been filled to the brim; it had overflowed; it had fallen from his grasp, and lay smashed and scattered at his feet.

After several hours of perplexity, he had arrived at a remarkable conclusion: he would disappear. He had quarrelled with life and would leave it, not physically, by means of suicide; but morally, by isolation. Like many momentous issues, this had been an impetuous resolve, and its completion was as yet sketchy. He had read somewhere of a man who, in disgust of life, had gone away and lived on an unvisited island.

He, Jack Balstoun, was in a case of this sort: he had not the heart, he had no inducement, to mix with his kind: he would go and eke out his days in silent meditation.

It is not quite clear what gain he expected from taking such a course as this. Experience teaches that as nearly as possible every case of heart-ache is cured by time and cheerful association: yet instinct perversely drives us to homœopathic remedies. When you are sad, seek relief in sadness: this is our favourite prescription. Be morose, be morbid, collect all your grievances, and wallow in as thick a slough as you can make of them. By no means rouse yourself, show a brave front, keep heart up, and face the world undaunted. Here is common philosophy briefly expounded, and its very obedient disciple was our friend Jack.

‘Was ever a poor devil so ill-used,’ he wondered. ‘Were ever bright prospects more dismally marred? Life made dark, spirit crushed, ambition gone; nothing remains for me but a living grave until kind providence allots me one permanently.’

It would be necessary, of course, to get someone to assist in carrying out his idea. If not for company’s sake, anyhow he would need a second pair of hands to render existence feasible. He wondered whether there was anyone about the place upon whom he could rely. There was the coachman; but he was getting old and rheumatic. His devotion to Jack was beyond doubt, but he probably had few accomplishments off the box-seat, and driving would be at a discount on a desert island. There was the head-gardener; but even his affection for Jack might give way

under the bitterness of exchanging the Balstoun gardens for a patch of wild scrub. The domestics were one and all attached to him, as he knew very well; but probably they would prefer to die for him than live with him on such terms. There remained one man in whom he had some hope: Matthew Taylor was a gallant fellow, a rare friend of Jack's, full of vigour, and not overproud of his position as assistant forester. He was a clever man, too: he had learnt a good deal more woodcraft than his father was capable of teaching him: he had a good notion of botany, had picked up some geology, and had told Jack many a time of his wish to ascertain what lay beyond the pale of Balstoun. He was a man to be trusted: a helpful creature, for whom adventure would present strong attractions.

If misfortunes came singly we should very

likely be worse off than we are. As it is, we seldom allow distress to have undisputed sway over us. Jack might have drifted into a deplorable plight if he had brooded incessantly upon Mrs. Dasent; but the prospect of quitting home and the purpose of establishing himself somewhere, like Robinson Crusoe, were superadded to shift the gravity of the onslaught. Fierce determination to be avenged on somebody or something fired him as he stalked away towards a part of the forest where he expected to find Matthew Taylor. The iron was hot, and he must strike forthwith.

He followed a broad ride refulgent with wild flowers. A thousand different notes in all degrees of shrillness and melody filled the air, but he gave more attention to a sound of hammering near ahead. Advancing thither, he came across a grey-haired veteran repairing a damaged fence.

The hammering ceased, and Taylor senior, who was the person so occupied, raised a good-tempered face to his visitor. Jack put as much cheerfulness as he could muster into his manner, and talked about indifferent matters for a while; then he inquired where Matt was at work, and set off again upon his quest.

Matthew Taylor was a sturdy Briton of five-and-thirty, with a merry eye and a ruddy countenance. He stepped out of the jungle which his axe had piled round him, and wiped his streaming brow. He had been Jack's friend and henchman in many an enterprise, ranging from child's gardening and rabbit keeping to tree planting and dog breeding. His work as one of his father's 'men' gave little scope for enterprise, and he relied on Jack for whatever diversion life might have in store for him.

‘ Well, Matt, how are you getting on ?’

‘ Nicely, Mr. Jack, thank ye : so are the puppies. You’ve not been to see them lately, sir.’

Jack cut at the long grass with his stick.

‘ I haven’t had time,’ he said.

‘ Shall you have them up in your own kennel, sir, or will you leave them with me through the summer ?’ asked the forester.

‘ I don’t want them,’ answered Jack. ‘ Look here, Matt, I’ve come to talk to you about going away from here.’ Matt brightened at once, and listened eagerly. ‘ I have made up my mind to go away altogether,’ Jack went on. ‘ I want a change, and I mean to try an experiment. I want to find some place where nobody lives and nobody is likely to try to live, and make my home there. I mean to rough it, and

I want some one to rough it with me. How would it suit you to go ?'

Matt made no answer ; he looked at his young patron in amazement.

'Why, Mr. Jack, that is a wonder surely,' he said, presently.

'It will be a change certainly,' said Jack. 'I shall try and find some small island ; build myself a house, and stop there. You can do as much gardening as you like ; you will be your own master. There will be no lack of employment, for we shall have to do everything for ourselves. What do you think of it ?'

Matt twisted his beard between his fingers, and pondered.

'I'm thinking of the old people,' he said.

This was a rebuke to Jack, who had certainly not considered his father in the matter.

‘ If you was to ask me, sir, to go off with you to the North Pole or the South Pole or any other foreign country, you know as I’d do it and be thankful. I’d wish nothing better. But my father and mother is both old, and they’d take it ill maybe, if I was to leave ’em. That’s my only fear, sir. It would be fine that making a wild place ship-shape and settling there like explorers,’ he added, with enthusiasm.

‘ Well, there it is,’ said Jack. ‘ I mean to go, and I must get some one to go with me. I’d like you to come, Matt, but I don’t want to stand between you and your people.’

‘ How long maybe would you stay away, sir?’ asked Matt.

‘ God knows. I shouldn’t come back at all, perhaps. You could come any time, though.’

‘ It do seem a wonder, Mr. Jack,’ Matt

said again, presently. He had too much reverence to put questions as to why and wherefore.

Jack went on recounting his intentions, his listener becoming fired with a spirit of adventure ; and the upshot of it all was, that Matt declared his resolution of throwing in his lot with the adventure, provided his parents did not take the proposal too deeply to heart.

Sir John's attitude upon learning his son's views was characteristic. He displayed no excitement ; considered the idea ridiculous ; strongly advised Jack to reflect ; but added that the latter was his own master and could do as he liked. No man was justified in keeping his son at home ; choice of residence was free to everybody of full age ; it was one of those things where the parent's interference would be an abuse of authority. In his

heart he was disgusted, but he was consistent, and had therefore to refrain from opposition.

Arthur Balstoun went to his brother in a fever.

‘Surely,’ he said, ‘you are not going to let Jack bury himself alive.’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Sir John, ‘how can I help it?’

‘You can use your authority. You stopped his marriage because you thought it imprudent. You can stop this, which is certainly a worse business.’

‘Not at all,’ said Sir John. ‘In the matter of marriage I think I am entitled to interfere; in this case I am not. If Jack chooses to go cruising about desert islands he has a perfect right to do it. He may go to the devil, for all I care.’

This broke from him in sheer bitterness of spirit—Jack’s fortunes were the Baronet’s

dearest interest, and he was cut to the heart at this madcap scheme. It was in his view unworthy of a Balstoun; it argued a want of dignity, and an incapacity for taking a proper place in life. Unluckily, Sir John was by habit so cold and matter-of-fact that he could only judge others by rule, not by sympathy. He was not in touch with his son, and never could be: he could only treat him in a very gentlemanly manner, which was unequal to the present emergency.

Failing to elicit hope from the Baronet, Arthur now addressed himself to his nephew. He found Jack in the garden, and walked with him up and down a terrace, expostulating with might and main.

‘We’ll admit, Jack, you have been hardly treated: so much the more reason for not turning tail. What you talk of doing will look like running away.’

‘It’s just what I am doing,’ said Jack. ‘I am running away: not because I am afraid of life, it’s because I hate it, and want to get away from it.’

‘But it isn’t fair on your people. Why should you cut us all? We’ve not hurt you.’

Jack laughed savagely.

‘A great deal you will care. I don’t suppose half-a-dozen people will think of me after six months.’

‘Come,’ said Arthur, ‘that’s not fair on me for one.’

‘I excepted half-a-dozen. You are one of them.’

‘It’s hard lines for your father,’ persisted Arthur. ‘No fellow would be justified in doing this, situated as you are. You know very well he is devoted to you. He would do anything for you.’

‘I have come to the conclusion,’ broke

out Jack, 'that the relation between father and son is perfectly damnable. If they are near enough in age to be companions, the father is generally jealous; if not, the father inevitably loses the power of getting on a level with the son. Except in rare cases, the son is entirely at the father's mercy, because one can't live without money; so it becomes a mercenary submission.'

Arthur Balstoun gasped out a protest, but Jack went on:

'After my father's treatment of me, I could never look on him as a friend. He has ruined my life, yet I have to grin and bear it because he is my paymaster.'

'That's too strong, Jack,' urged Arthur. 'You know I wouldn't say anything to hurt you, but you must know that your father would be justified by most people. His only object is your happiness.'

‘He hasn’t succeeded very well, so far,’ answered Jack.

Arthur next appealed to his affection for Balstoun; his attachment to his neighbours, and his pride in the place he occupied amongst them. To no avail; Arthur Balstoun might as well have talked to the family portraits indoors. In some ways it would have been more profitable: they would have been less excited. Jack proceeded with complete assurance to explain to his uncle that his career was irreparably broken; that he was a disappointed, heart-broken man; that all ambition and hope had gone out of him, and all capacity for ever doing good in the world. Soured and prematurely aged by misfortune, he could never fulfil the high mission which he had contemplated hitherto.

‘I don’t see that your life need be very hard,’ Arthur said. ‘Compare it with all

the poor wretches who really have a bad time.'

'You are one of the people, Arthur, who think poverty is the only thing deserving pity. Don't you see that there's just as much suffering amongst the rich as anywhere else. Go to the most envied people of your acquaintance, and ask them whether they really find life so pleasant that they would like it to last eternally.'

'It's their own fault if they have made it disagreeable.'

'It may be a poor man's fault that he is poor; that doesn't help him. It may be a penalty of being highly civilised that we have troubles. We have nerves; poor people haven't. We catch chills and get over-worked, and require change of air; poor people don't. We vex ourselves continually about things of which they know nothing and never heard. We have cul-

tivated our minds and bodies so highly, that we are sensitive beyond endurance ; we have invented our disorders. The poor have nothing to consider but their daily wants and simple affections. Give them food, and freedom from sickness and disturbance, and their life is complete ; whilst we are loving, and hating, and struggling, and failing, and all ending in disappointment more or less.'

This tirade took all the fight out of Arthur. His arguments were neither ample nor well marshalled, and he felt half disposed to agree with his nephew. The effect of this was bad, for Jack now flattered himself that he had silenced opposition, and that there was nothing more to be said. Arthur retired presently, meekly repeating that Jack was meditating an unwarrantable act, and praying him to think better of it.

An answer came to Sir John's telegram in due course. It said that Dodd was still alive and well; and added that he was living much as usual. The news was communicated to Mrs. Dasent, and Sir John felt that his responsibility in the matter ceased from that moment.

Then came Jack's interview with Mrs. Dasent. She was too ill to see him at first; but as soon as she had revived a little from the prostration brought on by strain of mind, she sent a message which brought him to her side at once. She looked wan and drooping, as if she had been in a fever; but in her greeting there was a certain resigned cheerfulness.

'Now that it is quite impossible I really feel happier,' she said. 'All uncertainty is gone: now we know. I tried to do what was right, Jack.'

He sat with his head bent, hardly con-

scious, apparently, that she spoke to him. He answered, however,

‘ If I could only unsay what I said to you, I could bear it better.’

She smiled at him.

‘ What did you say? I forget.’

Then he looked up, and felt there could be no more shadow between them; she forgave him indeed.

‘ It’s no good denying,’ he said, ‘ that things are as bad as they can be. It’s no good telling you I don’t mind, and I shall get on very well, because I shan’t.’ Like a genuine young lord of creation, he began with his own case. ‘ Whether you would have married me or whether you wouldn’t, doesn’t matter: the fact remains, it is an impossibility; I don’t care now what becomes of me.’

It was a distressing sight: his grief was so great. In a way it was a consolation to

feel the devotion of this brave young heart; she was by no means untouched. But behind it there was looming the other figure; the man she had never quite forgotten, and had almost managed to forgive.

The two powers were balanced against one another. She had felt her late sacrifice too deeply to permit of its being easily ignored: the idea of separation brought its pain, but there was something now to blunt the edge. Jack's misery distressed her infinitely, but she could tell herself, with comparative composure, that he would recover. No one likes to think that a love once gained can ever be lost. Our vanity can't bear the idea that the man or woman we love can ever again think of us calmly, any more than we like to affront our constancy with the notion that our own passion is capable of fading. In fact, in the matter of love we are equal

to believing anything: and it requires some strong motive, such as I am trying to explain that Mrs. Dasent had found, to enable anyone of us to think without regret of love crumbling into cold ashes.

There is no doubt that plenty yet remains for men of genius to accomplish. Everything has not yet been done and said. Of course a great modern comedy has yet to be written, and we are waiting for the man who is to do it: but for a man of first-rate imagination there remains pre-eminently the task of writing a hypothetical history of the world, supposing love eliminated. Even if printing had never been invented, or if Christopher Columbus had not performed the same service to the Yankee race, the world's history would have been less affected than in the contingency of Cupid having been strangled instead of only blinded. All of which is a digression.

and does not help forward our story.

Jack unfolded to Mrs. Dasent his scheme. At first she objected strongly: it was obviously the worst thing he could do. But, upon the other hand, there was something good in beholding such sacrifice on her account, and with it a suspicion, half justifying acquiescence, half regretful, that his resolve would probably break down in time; that he would come home again. When it came to discussing Mrs. Dasent's future, plain prose had to be talked in the matter of rent. She must leave at once. London was her chosen resting-place, and her design was to proceed to Australia as quickly as possible. Expenses were her difficulty: unless she could sub-let the house she could not well afford the journey.

‘I suppose I had better see Mr. Tracer about it,’ she said.

‘It’s no good asking for any favour from my father,’ muttered Jack. ‘I don’t believe he is capable of putting himself out for anybody.’

‘He might for the person he wanted to marry,’ said Mrs. Dasent, conscious of the humorous side.

‘I wonder you can suppose that. He has allowed himself to be put out about you, certainly, but not in the way I mean.’

‘That’s not a civil speech. You shouldn’t remind me of what has happened,’ said Mrs. Dasent.

‘I can’t weigh civility to-day,’ said Jack. ‘I feel as matter-of-fact as an attorney.’

‘Then you ought to see the folly of what you intend doing. No practical being would think of such a thing; no one but a visionary. It is a dreadful proposal.

My only consolation is, that I am sure you will repent.'

'Never,' said Jack, stoutly. 'My life is fixed now.'

She smiled, and debated how to put her next sentence. She wished to base her argument on the score of youth: had she done so she might have gone far towards putting him out of conceit with his project; might have wrecked his philosophy. She knew, however, that it would hurt him, so she refrained.

'You must admit, Jack,' she said, 'that however great our sorrows may be, time brings them relief. Have you ever read or heard of a man who remained irreconcilable all his life?'

'Con,' cried Jack, 'you only add to my wretchedness. You could not try and dissuade me if you understood my mind.'

She stood her ground.

‘I am talking with you as a matter of fact attorney. You are quite right; we must be matter of fact in face of what has happened. It is well enough to make sacrifices for a reality: we must not do as much for a shadow.’

‘With me it is a reality,’ said Jack, in a moan.

‘No, the reality is on my side; my husband. Your marriage with me consequently recedes into the clouds. It would not be brave to make a hermit of yourself for the sake of something which cannot happen.’

‘It is for something which has happened.’

‘But don’t you see that this must make me wretched too. It will always be on my mind that I have spoilt your life. Will you make me bear that on my conscience?’

‘It was not you,’ he answered. ‘It is my father’s fault.’

Mrs. Dasent smiled again, though not gladly.

‘It is not his fault that I am still married.’

She was quite astonished at her own success in the argument.

Jack persisted.

‘It was he that set things wrong. Fate was against us all through.’

‘Now you are confusing fate and your father. Oh, Jack, don’t think I am making light of it. Don’t imagine I’m not heavy-hearted. You don’t want to be told what life seemed to offer me a little while ago, and you don’t suppose I haven’t suffered in my turn. Only it’s useless to give way: one must make the best of things.’

Jack had an indistinct idea of being

ashamed of himself, but he was too much wrapt up in his trouble to care greatly.

‘Supposing you get rid of this house,’ he asked, presently; ‘what then?’

‘Then I go to Australia.’

‘And then?’

‘How can I tell. That depends on what I find when I get there.’

‘Oh, Con, you leave me for a man who has treated you infamously. You can’t, you shan’t; come with me, we’ll make a home somewhere, and be happy in spite of everybody.’

He pressed forward trying to take her hands, but she snatched them away, and put one over his mouth. It was done with consummate dignity. Jack felt he was rebuked; that he had done a bad thing.

‘Don’t interrupt me when I am speak-

ing,' Mrs. Dasent said, ignoring his outburst. 'I am going to join my husband, and until I have seen him, I can't say what my plans are likely to be.'

Jack walked to an open window, and began twisting the leaves of a rose-tree climbing round it. A gust of passion had carried him away: he hardly realised what he had said.

'Where can I write to you?' he asked, presently.

'You mustn't write to me, Jack.'

'Why not?'

'Because the sooner you forget my existence the better it will be.'

'Connie,' he cried, turning back to her.

There was a pause: then—

'For both of us,' she added, giving way.

In a moment Jack was at her feet and his arms were round her. She loved him ; and gallantly as she had striven against it, she could not be rid of the feeling that they were on the verge of separation ; a separation which would have all the darkness of death. There was hardly a single chance of their meeting again : certainly none of a close re-union. Parting is worse than death sometimes, because people in the latter case can find consolation in supernatural faith ; whereas, when one says good-bye in earthly parting, there is the sense of breaking off a bit of one's life which can never be replaced, and the gap for the moment is grievous to contemplate. We often preach, and sometimes practise, philosophy concerning death ; we never seek the same comfort in the pains of life.

It was a cruel day for Jack and Mrs.

Dasent. The little room, with its simple furniture and pretty litter of small objects, was full of sunshine ; full, too, of happy associations. But if the guardian angels were there, surely no gladness was reflected in their faces ; only tears of compassion were in their eyes.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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